HANS LEBERECHT

Light in Koordi

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Hans Leberecht

LIGHT IN KOORDI

A Novel

STALIN PRIZE

1948

HANS LEBERECHT

Light in Koordi

A NOVEL

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow 1951

TRANSLATION EDITED BY

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HANS LEBERECHT

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Light in Koordi

CHAPTER ONE

The family at Vao farmstead had just finished a hearty breakfast in the large kitchen. Johannes Vao's three strapping daughters now rose from the table and immediately went out to attend to their duties. The youngest, fifteen-year-old Linda, set about washing the floors—it was Saturday.

Johannes' wife, Liina, a woman of powerful build, moved busily about the kitchen. Her large white arms were bared to the elbow, and everything she touched was galvanized into motion. The water splashed noisily into the iron cauldron for boiling potatoes for the pigs; the

faggots in the stove crackled as the flame spread over them; the dishes slid with a clatter into the basin of warm water; flour dust rose over the wooden dough mixer—today was bread-baking day at the Vao farm. Liina splashed water over the cement floor, which bore many a trace of heavily-shod peasant boots, and mopped it dry in a minute.

Only the master, Johannes Vao, a stockily-built farmer with a big head set firmly on a short beefy neck, remained seated at the breakfast table. He sat there placidly, his broad shoulders relaxed and his back slightly hunched, watching his wife's bustling activities with languid and appreciative interest. His eye followed the rivulet of dirty water that trickled to his feet from Liina's sweeping broom, but he made no attempt to move his feet out of the way. From the leisurely manner in which he laid out his tin of home-grown tobacco and lighter and took up his charred old pipe with the brass band on the stem, Liina gathered that Johannes had no intention of getting up so soon.

"Peeter Tatrik is leading his stallion—to the smith's, I suppose," she said in a shrill voice, glancing through the window at the road.

"H'm, to the smith's?" her husband echoed musingly. "I didn't know he was planning—"

"To have him shod," she said with decision. "The smith doesn't have much to do these days, and Tatrik is taking advantage of the opportunity."

Johannes was aware of an undertone of irony in Liina's voice obviously meant for him, but he only blew out a cloud of blue smoke and did not turn a hair. His mind was at ease. Indeed, what particular need was there to worry if a man's farming affairs were as good, if not in some ways better, than his neighbours'—had he not threshed his crops and autumn-ploughed his land? And weren't the potatoes stowed away, neat and snug? True, he could make a trip to the woods and fetch a cartload or two of faggots, or go to that same smith's and have runners put on his sledge, as had already been arranged. He could find something else to do, if it came to that, but was it worth doing today, on a Saturday, when it was drizzling outside and so warm and cosy inside, and so pleasant to watch his wife and daughters making short work of their domestic tasks? Besides, a man needed sometimes to sit quietly over his pipe and think. That was what

tobacco was planted for—to give a man pleasure. He, Johannes, took life leisurely, and surely that was not a bad thing. He was the head of a large, hard-working and close-knit family, and the grain in his barns lasted from harvest to harvest. Who could say that old Johannes' word was not valued in the village of Koordi? It was highly respected. What better proof was needed than that he had been elected to the land committee? He was, in a manner of speaking, a public figure.

He would go to the smith's when the rain stopped, and the faggots were better brought down by sledge. It was good to live leisurely, to carefully consider a hundred times how and when best to slaughter a sheep, so that it will have yielded the most wool and lambs, and yet not have tough meat....

Such were Johannes Vao's thoughts as he calmly puffed on his crackling pipe. Liina's shrill voice suddenly broke the smooth thread of his reflections:

"Saamu's coming to pay us a call."

"H'm," Johannes muttered with a note of interest in his voice as he stirred slightly in his seat.

A man in a hareskin winter cap with dangling ear flaps was coming down the edge

of the field from the neighbouring farmstead, whose wet galvanized iron roof gleamed dully above the fir trees. There was something odd and disturbing in the way he walked, carefully picking his way across the field with short steps, his head held high as though listening for something.

"Probably something the matter with Anna Kurvest," Liina said with a sigh. "Poor woman.... Her sons are God knows where. And that Kurvest himself—where is he, why hasn't he come back?"

"Huh, come back," Johannes said, smiling scornfully at his wife's innocence. "Too much on his conscience." He waved his hand and muttered, "He won't come back, not likely—if he's alive. They say he was last seen on Saaremaa Island, but without his horse and cart and things."

"I don't feel a bit sorry for old Kurvest and his sons," Liina said with sudden warmth, "it's Saamu I'm thinking about—where'll he go if his sister dies? I feel sorry about the farm too, with those relatives suddenly turning up and taking away the cows and pigs."

"Yes, it's clear they're stripping the place," Johannes assented readily, with a nod. "Anna is ill, and as for Saamu—what does he care? The

property's not his anyway. I saw a cart down at their place—a new cart, and standing idle. I thought at the time: ours is pretty old—we've got to buy one.... You'll see, someone will be taking a fancy to the cart too."

Johannes eyed his wife with a look of annoyance, angrily spat out the pipe juice and wound up on a note of decision:

"No fear, I'll see to that."

Meanwhile the man was drawing near. At the end of the field bound he hesitated a moment, then proceeded at a slower pace through the plough-field.

"He's going too far to the right," Liina said anxiously. "He's heading straight for our pond."

A second later her shrill voice was heard shouting from the doorway:

"Saamu, keep to the left! Head for the shed.... This way, Saamu!"

Saamu stepped cautiously across the threshold, and now that his whitish eyes gleamed dully for a moment in his alert, uplifted face, one could see that he was blind.

His whole appearance, from the collar of his freshly-laundered shirt to his neatly-laced leather sandals, breathed an air of cleanliness and tidiness.

"Good morning," Saamu said in a high tenor. "There aren't any strangers here, are there?"

He turned his blind eyes about shyly and questioningly.

"Nobody but the master and I," Liina said, leading Saamu to the table.

It was clear from the Vaos' friendly reception that Saamu was a welcome guest in their home.

But this time they did not hear the usual jokes from Saamu. He sat silent and grave; he had staidly laid his hareskin cap on his knees, and he stroked its fur with long, sensitive fingers that were tipped with thick, horny nails.

"Everything all right at home, Saamu?" asked Liina.

"No, it isn't," Saamu said quietly. "That's why I've come. Johannes, and you, Liina, I wanted to ask a favour—for your girls to harness our white gelding and drive to town to fetch the doctor. I thought, now who can I go to?—I'll go and ask Johannes and Liina. . . ."

Johannes began filling his pipe, and he was so absorbed in this occupation that he had no time to answer.

Liina broke the silence. "Is Anna worse?"

"She—she's driving it away," Saamu said in a low voice, after a moment's hesitation.

"Driving what away?" Liina asked, startled.

"With her hand—like this. . . ."

Saamu threw his head back slightly and assumed a vacant expression, then slowly raised his hand to his eyes and moved it away with an effort, as though breaking an invisible web that covered his face. The action was copied with such reality that his hearers froze into silence, and Liina sat with dilated eyes.

Sensing the questioning glances upon him, Saamu explained:

"She fumbles over the wall with her hand. . . . We must send for the doctor."

"Today?" Johannes muttered with a glance at the window.

"Yes, today," Liina answered for Saamu with decision, and the latter softly echoed:

"Yes, today would be better. . . ."

"Well, if that's how it is, our Vilma will go, she can salt the cabbage afterwards," Johannes decided. "Vilma will go with you and harness your old gelding and bring the doctor."

But Johannes immediately changed his mind. The thought of the new cart at the Kur-

vest farm gave him no peace. He said in a burst of generosity:

"No, that won t do, Vilma's a woman and she won't be able to manage it. This is an urgent case and the doctor will need persuading. Besides, your gelding Antu is too old, he won't get back by evening. I'll go myself and harness my own horse, only I'll use your cart. Well, that's that! I'm going with you."

And Johannes rose to accompany Saamu and harness his horse to Kurvest's cart.

It was past noon when Johannes Vao drew up his horse, its coat glistening from the rain, in the Kurvest farmyard, and Doctor Tõnisberg, a short elderly man in an old-fashioned wide-brimmed hat, shut the umbrella under which he had ridden all the way. He jumped nimbly from the cart and strode vigorously through the puddles with splashing galoshes toward the doorway in which Saamu stood bowing to him.

This was jolly old Doctor Tõnisberg, a hale and hearty man on whose robust health time seemed to have no effect. Many an elderly farmer, including Johannes himself, remembered Tõnisberg with temples that were beginning to silver when they themselves were still beardless youths. Now, when Johannes' own

coarse thick hair was streaked with grey, the doctor's voice sounded as vigorous and cheery as before, and his firm cheeks were as ruddy as ever. It was probably this healthy flush on the doctor's cheeks more than anything else that inspired the local countryfolk with confidence in his powers and skill.

"Hullo, Saamu, how d'you do? You're not getting a day older either, I see. Yes, yes . . ." the doctor's loud cheerful voice boomed in the kitchen, startling the silence of the place. A grey cat leapt off a chair and hid itself, and a white spitz dog with pointed ears sprang up and fell to barking loudly.

"Well, where's the patient, where's Anna Kurvest? Let's have a look at her, yes, yes. . . . Here?" he asked, straightway opening the door into the sickroom.

Johannes took off his stiffened canvas waterproof, from which a pool of water instantly formed on the floor, but kept on his coat, for he would have to drive the doctor back soon. Then he sat down by the table and pulled out his tobacco tin.

He could hear Tõnisberg's booming voice echoing through the rooms.

"Well, where's my Anna, where's my pretty girl, let's see what they've done to her. . . . I've

heard you, yes, so I have—remember it quite well. You used to sing in old Schüts' choir at the Mardi People's House. Yes, yes—you had a fine voice, an angelic voice, I should say—to be sure.... But I hardly recognize you now. Well, well, let's see what the trouble is...."

The doctor's shouts gradually trailed off to barely audible muttering. He was answered by a weak feminine voice; when he heard it, Johannes shook his head.

Saamu, as he poured water on the doctor's small, hairy white hands over the basin, listened intently to what he was saying, but the doctor spoke just ordinary and unimportant words from which it was difficult to make anything out.

"You still have summer flies here, I see," he boomed, catching the drone of a solitary fly as he lathered his hands and splashed the water about.

Tõnisberg made out several prescriptions. When he had put his curlycue signature under the last one he lowered his voice and said to Saamu in a forceful tone that held a note of reproach:

"There are people, my friend, who take their lives at once, and there are others who go on for years...."

Not understanding what the doctor meant, but feeling that he was alluding to his sister Anna, Saamu asked:

"What is wrong with her?"

"Wrong with her? Everything and nothing.... Her heart's bad, of course. I've prescribed what's necessary, yes, yes...."

The doctor then got up and put on his coat. From the passage, while Tõnisberg was making his way towards the cart, Johannes called out: "Wait a minute, doctor." He grasped Saamu by the sleeve and muttered:

"I've been thinking some time.... Now you have two carts, let's say.... What d'you need two for? With you it's a case of never knowing what tomorrow will bring, and I've got to buy one. Why should I go to the market for a cart when we're neighbours?"

"The carts aren't mine," Saamu answered indifferently.

"That's just it—they're not yours, they're Kurvest's. But where's Kurvest?" Johannes rumbled gleefully, pressing Saamu against the boards of the passage wall with his powerful chest and breathing hotly down his neck. "Gone phut! No more Kurvest! You tell Anna. If anything happens to her, they'll strip the place clean. And we're neighbours, after all.

I can pay something for it, a little cash, or flour, say. . . ."

"I'll tell her," Saamu promised in the same indifferent tone.

The doctor could be heard coughing impatiently in the cart out in the yard.

"What's it matter to you? It isn't as if you're tied to the place," Johannes went on muttering as he plodded across the yard in Saamu's wake. "You're alone in the world, a single soul in a clean shirt. The cart is Kurvest's, but Kurvest has gone phut! And a cart's a piece of property."

Saamu thanked the doctor in a melodious voice for having come all that way from town for the sake of them, common folk. He hoped the doctor wouldn't be angry, but he had put some bacon and a bag of white flour in the cart, under the tarpaulin, just here. . . . He had wanted to put some eggs in too, but he hadn't been able to find any lately—the hens were hiding them, or perhaps it was the polecats. . . . He hoped the doctor wouldn't take offence. . . .

"Now, now, that's entirely unnecessary," the doctor said with a wry face. Feeling the sizable proportions of the parcel wrapped up in the sack, he thought to himself: "Why, he's put a whole side in here. . . ."

While Johannes busied himself around the horse, the doctor turned to Saamu's grave uplifted face and hurriedly repeated his instructions, then he sighed and shook the blind man's cold hand.

"Never mind, old man.... Yes, yes...."

The cart rolled out of the yard with a soft rustle and here and there a rattling over the stones.

"You tell Anna!" Johannes shouted, looking back. "I'll keep the cart in the meantime."

The sound of the wheels died away in the distance, and the wind could now be heard rummaging about the corners of the buildings and whispering in the fir hedge around the house. A fine drizzle fell from the bleak October sky.

Saamu stood for a while with arms dropped by his sides, listening to the wind. Then he went into the house, where it seemed especially quiet after the doctor's loud voice. The shadows of autumn dusk gathered quickly.

Saamu resumed his interrupted workday tasks. He lit a lantern and placed it on a bench. A blind man would hardly be expected to need a light, but the fact of the matter was that Saamu was not completely blind. He could "see shadows," as the people say. Though his eyes were covered with a lifeless film, they were

dimly sensitive to the sunlight, and he could see the light in the windows and a lamp on dark evenings; he was even able to tell time by the sun.

There was a good deal of work to do in the house, for it was nearly a year now that he had been the only workman on the Kurvest farm, once the most prosperous in the village. Although that year had played sad havoc with the farm, and much of its property had imperceptibly melted away, the work was more than enough for one man, especially for a man so handicapped as Saamu.

He lit the fire in the hearth, carried in water and filled the cauldron and placed it on the fire to warm; he chopped up potatoes into big tubs for the cows and pigs and added flour and hot water. When the feed was ready, he picked up the lantern and went out to the cattle shed.

The wide door of the shed opened with a creak. The spacious darkness met Saamu with soft rustlings and the smells of chaff and straw. Sensing a human presence, the horse began to neigh loudly, a cock crowed and a pig grunted sharply.

If anyone had seen Saamu here in the cattle shed, in the dim light of the lantern, he

would have stood long in amazement watching how ably and lovingly the blind man filled the cows' cribs with hay, and scratched each of their soft pendulous necks, how he searched in the armful of hay he had brought for a tuft of clover and carried it to the lips of old Antu, ran his fingers over the horse's shaggy forelock and pulled out several clinging burs of burdock. Everyone would have been astonished to see the broad kindly smile that appeared on his face when he spoke to the gelding:

"Well, Antu, my wedding horse, what are we going to do?"

And he began to brush down Antu with a currycomb. His face wore a look of utter peace and placidity, as though it was not on this accursed farm he lived, as though Anna were not seriously ill.... Yet he loved Anna dearly!

Saamu forgot none of the animals. Plodding back and forth across the muddy yard, he carried up hogwash in buckets for the pigs, then fed and watered the sheep. After that he milked the cows, strained the milk in the kitchen, and poured some of it into a saucer for the grey cat and the white spitz Miki. All this kept him busy a good few hours, and it had grown quite dark when Saamu, after tidying up the kitchen and washing his hands, entered

his sister's room and called into the darkness in his mellow voice:

"Now we'll soon have a light. . . ."

He lit the lamp on a small bedside table.

The pale, sickly face of a woman floated out of the gloom. Now, when ill-health had taken its toll of Anna, it was difficult to guess her age; but she was by no means an old woman yet, and once she must have been good-looking.

"I don't need the light," Anna answered quietly, without stirring.

The light was dully reflected in the polished curves of the furniture. There were no ugly or cheap things in this room, unless it were Saamu's shabby jacket and the sandals on his feet. He himself seemed out of place here, though neither Anna, nor this furniture, nor the farm itself could do without Saamu—no, they certainly could not. . . .

"I've brought you some warm milk," Saamu said.

"I don't want any," Anna replied in a weak voice. She answered slowly, as though it cost her an effort to speak.

Paying no heed to what she said, Saamu laid the little table at the head of the bed, placing on it a white jug of milk, a saucer of honey and a fresh bun. Then, although there were

a sofa and upholstered armchairs in the room, he brought in a rickety old stool from the kitchen and sat down on it at the foot of the bed in silence.

There was utter stillness, and only Saamu's keen sense of hearing could detect any sounds of life. Something creaked somewhere—Saamu knew it was the weathercock turning on the roof; there was a light thud in the kitchen—that was the cat pouncing upon a mouse; something scratched against the window—and Saamu guessed that it was the branch of the maple swaying in the wind and grazing the pane. Then a shuffling sound was heard in the room itself. Anna had lately been making a strange movement, which Saamu had so faithfully copied at the Vaos'. She raised a terribly emaciated hand to her eyes, surveyed it for a long time, then tore it away from her face as though breaking some invisible web. When her arm dropped it grazed the wall and produced that odd shuffling sound.

"Have something to eat," Saamu said softly.

The saucer tinkled. Anna forced herself to take a few swallows of milk and then put the glass down with a shudder.

There was silence again. Again a sound: a regular tapping as of someone timidly asking

admission—that was Miki's tail beating rhythmically on the floor as he scratched himself.

"Saamu," said Anna, and Saamu caught a new and puzzling note in her voice—"my burial dress is in the wardrobe, in the cardboard box. . . ."

Saamu opened his mouth to answer, but no words came. He wanted to say that the doctor had prescribed sure medicines and promised to cure Anna—good old Doctor Tõnisberg; it wasn't for nothing that Saamu had put a side of bacon for him in the cart—a good twenty pounds, if anything. But Saamu, accustomed as he was all his life to facing facts squarely in all their stark truth and wisdom, could not say this, still less to his own sister who was preparing to depart this house.

"Saamu," said Anna, "while I'm alive, you take Mart's black woollen coat, it's still sturdy and good, and take his brown leather top boots too. You'll get ten years' wear out of them."

What he heard was so unexpected and astounding that Saamu could hardly believe his ears. Just think of that—Kurvest's magnificent coat, whose cloth was softer than the velvety lips of the old gelding Antu—there was no finer coat in all the village! And those wonderful brown boots with double soles of spirit-soaked

leather, with hard tops! What a figure he would cut in that baronial outfit, he, old Saamu—why, the whole village would laugh at him!

And despite the solemnity of the moment, his face involuntarily expanded in a grin, which he covered with his hand.

"Saamu," Anna said in a faint voice. "you take it, I order you to. You've been working twenty years for Mart—and bl—blind. . . ."

She began gasping for breath.

"Now, now," Saamu murmured soothingly, "you mustn't upset yourself. . . ."

Again there was silence, this time a long one. Anna did not notice that the lamp had begun to smoke and was sooting the chimney. Still less could Saamu notice this.

"Saamu," Anna began in a voice of deep sadness, "you know, we've had a poor, hard life on this farm. I thought it would be better, but—you see yourself. . . ."

Saamu frowned and stirred uncomfortably. He could not follow his sister's train of thought. He disliked distressing conversations. He sat on for a while longer, then got up.

"Blow out the lamp," Anna said in a lifeless voice. "Take the milk too."

Saamu cleared the table and put out the lamp.

CHAPTER TWO

And Anna Kurvest was left alone with her thoughts in the deep gloom of the October night that had descended upon the farmstead. She lay motionless, staring wide-eyed into the darkness for long dreary hours, thinking and thinking till daybreak came and she fell into a short troubled sleep.

She had been ill for about a year, and it was difficult to say what the trouble was. It was a kind of slow general decline—a complete lack of appetite and utter apathy, weakness and at times heart attacks when she had the horrible sensation that her heart ceased to beat, when her breath failed her and everything swam before her eyes. She suffered, moreover, from insomnia and there was always a sickening dryness in her mouth.

She first took to bed from nervous shock caused by the turbulent events of that September night a year before when fighting was going on close at hand amid heavy gunfire, and the Germans began retreating in panic. They had taken two horses from the stable,

and the third, a fine stallion, Mart had hitched for himself. His jaw sagging, he had hastily stuffed things into suitcases with trembling hands—suits, the clock that stood on the table, underwear and even his fur coat, though the weather was warm, and had rushed away in the wake of the Germans. The most powerful man in the district had fled like a thief that stormy night, saying to his wife in parting:

"You'll answer to me for the safety of everything here."

It had been as frightful as though the walls of Kurvest farm had suddenly fallen in—that bastion whose strength Anna had taken for granted in her childhood, when she padded barefoot over the cold, hard-packed earthen floor in the home of her father, Kaarel Lomp. The people called him Cotter Kaarel, because he lived in a cot on another man's land and worked for other men on horses that did not belong to him. Most of the farmers in the village hired Cotter Kaarel's children as cowherds. Anna, too, had been a cowherd for ten years, until she turned eighteen. Although those had been years of cold and hunger, they were, perhaps, the happiest years of her life. So Anna thought now. But she had not thought so then, when she had dreamt of riches.

If Kaarel had had money, the floor in their room would have been a warm, wooden one, and not of earth.

If there had been money in her father's house, the doctors in the university town of Tartu would have cured her brother Saamu, who began to go blind because of walleye at the age of seven. And he would have seen the light, Saamu would.

If Peeter Sarapik, their quiet, hard-working neighbour, had had the money when it was needed—and not so much, either, only a hundred crowns—he would have saved his farm. But he did not have the money, he was in arrears, and so his house and land were sold at auction and he himself went mad. "There is a great power in riches if a man's life can be saved at the cost of a hundred crowns," thought Anna.

At the age of nineteen Anna was found to have a voice. Upon hearing her the church choirmaster, old Sexton Nordal, was moved to tears and told her:

"Verily, you can become the church's flute. . . ."

She began to sing in the church choir and afterwards in the choir of the People's House

under the schoolmaster Schüts. Among musical amateurs in villages far and wide Anna became famed for her voice.

Anna's beauty blossomed forth in those years. Surprisingly enough, on the meagre crust of the cowherd—but blossom forth it did. At parties the village lads began showing her marks of attention. Then Mart Kurvest, who had inherited the richest farm in Koordi upon his father's death, took notice of her. Anna did not like him. She did not like him for his unpleasant grating voice, his fussiness and his swaggering manner. No matter where and with whom he spoke Mart would always talk about himself, just as in discussing the crop prospects he had in mind only the wheat on his own fields.

In appearance Mart was unprepossessing, with a disjointed body that reminded one of a badly-folded carpenter's rule. The impression was due to his slightly bandied legs and his crooked arms, which he held away from his body. But then—each of his pedigree cows was worth more than everything Cotter Kaarel owned. He had three men like Kaarel and two girls working on his farm. While Kaarel was unable to put a roof on the cowshed which he had begun to build long ago, Mart was build-

ing a new house. And what a house! It was the same house in which Anna now lay dying. It had been built when she was twenty, the walls made of the finest grade of timber, the roof covered not with shingle or even slating, but with galvanized iron, and the stoves in the rooms faced with real white Swedish tiles and not with clay ones or with iron. There were four rooms in the house, a large cellar, a wind motor, and a sturdy barn and sheds that would stand a hundred years. There were twenty cows and five horses in the sheds.... Now that was a house for you, that was a farm, that was wealth! Did this not make up for all Mart's faults? Anna had thought that it did....

Came the moment when Mart squeezed her hand hard and, breathing heavily, said:

"Anna, what do you say to putting our loaves on the same shelf?"

Anna paled and became grave, but she did not withdraw her hand.

What loaf could she, the daughter of that poorest of men, Cotter Kaarel, place on the shelf of the Kurvest farmstead by the side of Mart's rich wheaten bread? Only her beauty and youth. If a hundred crowns was enough to save the life of a man, what was her beauty worth in comparison with the cost of that

richest of farms where there was not a thing worth less than a hundred? She would persuade Mart to take her poor brother Saamu into the house. Let there be a warm corner for him too on the Kurvest farm. Was it not a good deed she would do for her blind brother Saamu?

So Anna had thought.

God knows that she did not love Mart Kurvest, and she could not make herself love him.

His grating voice bored into her brain and his idle chatter and womanish fussiness wearied her. His ways and habits grew repulsive to her. He liked to have his back scratched before going to sleep and would waken his wife in the middle of the night and make her bring him some smoked fish or freshly-pickled cucumbers—he was a glutton and was fond of having something to chew on in bed at night.

Not everything turned out the way Anna had thought and hoped it would. She now had fine dresses—but Mart had forbidden her to sing in the choir or anywhere else.

"I won't have those fools goggling at you," he said, and not even the schoolmaster Schüts, who did not want to lose the best singer in his choir, could talk him out of his decision.

"A wife should be rich or at any rate pretty," Mart was fond of saying, thus hinting that he looked upon beauty as capital. Of what use was a wife's beauty if he couldn't do what he wanted with it?

Things did not turn out altogether well with Saamu either. Mart took him in, it is true, but it somehow happened that the blind relative was given a place to sleep in the barn during the summer and in the cattle kitchen during the winter. He spent most of his time out in the farmyard and in the Kurvest cattle sheds where he helped Mart's farm hands tend the animals, or he hoed in the vegetable garden where he separated the weeds from the seedlings with groping hands. He worked from morning till evening.

Anna gave birth to two sons—Gustav and Robert. She would scan their faces eagerly, as though expecting to find in them something she had lost, perhaps her own self. She looked in vain.... Even the children on this farm grew and developed according to some special law of their own, and did not resemble the children in her father's home. It was as though the very walls of the Kurvest farm exercised a mysterious power over people's souls.

She caught the resemblance to Mart in her

eldest son Robert when, barely able to stand on his own little bandy legs, he used to brandish his spoon to hit the cat on the head, and when he snivelled and whimpered from morning till night.

The worst of it all was that Mart liked it.

"The master is awakening in him," he said approvingly.

And as the younger son, Gustav, too grew older, Anna ever more often said to herself: "Mart!"

The years went by and the children grew up. The younger boy wore a Gymnasium cap and the elder swaggered about in a red uniform with aiguillettes—a private in the cavalry regiment where he was going through his term of military service. Her sons grew to manhood, became more polished than their father, but nothing altered. They remained the children of Mart of the Kurvest farm.

Not even work, though it was now her only comfort in life, brought Anna any satisfaction. She constantly felt she was working not for herself, but for the farm, for the master, like Saamu and the other farm hands in the house. Sometimes she would wonder whether she really was the mistress of a rich farm and not just a farm hand on it.

No, Mart Kurvest's wealth was not omnipotent. It had not brought Anna ordinary human happiness.

Anna thought she could see faint cracks in the solid foundation of the Kurvest farmstead. They soon became visible to Mart as well, who seemed to have discovered them quite suddenly. The year 1940 came like a bolt out of the blue of the clear June sky.

There was a change of government....

A sharp change took place in the countryside, something totally new, as though the narrow little Koordi running through the Kurvest meadows, a stream which had never overflowed even during the high-water season, had now suddenly burst its banks. Burst its banks and flooded the meadows and hollows, rushing on in a powerful torrent that threatened to sweep away the foundations of such bastions as the farmstead of Mart Kurvest. The farmstead already quivered under the powerful impact.

The first Soviet newspapers published in Tallinn stated in black and white that the poorest farm labourers would be able to receive land.

"Oh, did you hear—they're going to give us land!" Semidor, that eternally luckless

peasant, cried excitedly in his squalid shack, then clapped his old felt hat on his head and ran off to Kukk the shopkeeper for a newspaper.

"Land?" the lifelong farm labourers Maasalu and Taaksalu and scores of their like throughout the district of Koordi asked eagerly, with hope in their voice.

"Land?!" roared Mart Kurvest, crumpling up the newspapers and dashing them on the floor in a passion of fury. "A hundred nails in their coffin, not land!" he stormed, his face purple with rage.

But of what avail were Kurvest's ravings when the very foundations of the farm were being sapped? Forty hectares of his fields passed over to peasants who had little land. What made Mart most indignant was the fact that this transfer was carried out by the land surveyor who had so often been his guest and enjoyed his hospitality. And whom had he transferred it to? He could understand a beggar like that farm hand Maasalu getting it. He was of the kind who had lifted their heads under this new Soviet power, and you couldn't expect anything else from men like Maasalu. But that surveyor had gone and transferred land to his neighbours Tatrik and Meisterson,

and even that slyboots Johannes Vao had grabbed two hectares of his meadowland.

"The bastards! Damned wolves!" swore Mart. "And that's neighbours for you—how many times we shared the same bottle! And now they're like dogs, trying to bite into your leg from around a corner. They'd be glad to tear out a piece of flesh. . . ."

Yes, that was when the cracks started to run across the foundations of the Kurvest farm, and it did not really get back on its feet even when the little Koordi appeared to have slipped back into its customary channel and German soldiers amused themselves by catching crayfish in it, when talk of freedom and happiness was hushed all round and men spoke no more about rights to the land and a free life. Now Anna's sons, Gustav and Robert, wore the green uniforms of noncoms in the German SS troops. Mart recovered his fields and meadows from Maasalu, Meisterson and Tatrik and all the others, and had three prisoners of war working on his farm.

But Anna no longer believed in the farm's power, because her husband, so it seemed to her, was now himself a prey to strange anxieties; for all that, he gave himself a ferocious air and even took part in raids, armed with a rifle.

But the more truculent Mart pretended to be the deeper did he sink into the morass. And then blood was shed. Mart shot one of the war prisoners in his field.

"It's because he attempted to escape," Mart explained to his fellow villagers.

Was it really an attempt to escape? The question was never cleared up. Opinions in the village differed, but most people were inclined to put the murder down to Mart's vile temper, for he had been displeased at the way the war prisoners were working.

A week later one of the war prisoners really managed to make his escape, and Mart, fearing vengeance, began to lock himself up securely at night. However, he brought a slaughtered hog down to the commandant and asked for more war prisoners. After all, someone had to do the work on Mart's fields. Mart got himself enmeshed more and more.

Then came the news that his younger son Gustav had been killed at the front, near Narva. Mart received the news with surprising composure, as though he had had a presentiment of disaster. He was expecting vengeance.

The cracks widened right up to the night when the end came.

What was it he had said at parting?

"You'll answer to me for the safety of everything here. . . ."

She had hardly been a good caretaker, Anna thought. After she lost faith in the power of the Kurvest farmstead, she had become indifferent to its fate.

Some relatives of her husband's, whose existence Anna had never suspected, turned up and remembered various old debts. They took several cows away—"it will be hard now for Saamu to manage the farm alone," they had said.

Anna gradually got used to it.

The neighbours, too, whose honesty Anna had never doubted, made free with Mart's property and had no qualms about it. She did not think any the worse of them for it. In Koordi all men who wished to grow rich did likewise—Anna understood that. That was how the Kurvests too had come by their wealth—that power in which Anna had once had such implicit faith.

Anna had done the same thing herself. When paying the day labourers hadn't she tried to palm off second-grade or even mildewed flour instead of the first-grade flour agreed upon? And hadn't she given them the

leanest pork and mutton, and the pieces with the most bone?

After living a quarter of a century with Mart Kurvest she had in the end ceased to notice her brother Saamu's affliction, ceased to see his uncomplaining labour and even used to grumble and shout at him when he moved too slowly with his pails. Imperceptibly, life on the Kurvest farmstead had made her in the image of her husband—Mart Kurvest.

And only now, when illness was consuming Anna and it was too late to make any amends, when Anna was preparing to depart this house, did she for the first time in many and many a year notice with anguish the broken sandals on her brother's feet and the jacket with holes in the elbows, fit to be cast to a beggar, did she notice that he had grown older, Saamu had, and stooped. And seeing this, she realized with fright that she was to blame; perhaps no less to blame for Saamu's fate than Mart Kurvest himself. In her heart she had wished her brother well, but in reality she had helped to make him a lifelong farm hand. The consciousness of this burned into her soul, like a coal snatched from the stove smoulders in one's palm. This is why the bustling of the neighbours about her farmstead and

property now left Anna indifferent. Other thoughts occupied and tormented her mind.

She raked up all the memories of the past. So would some old maid on a poor farm pick out of her chests and drawers all the belongings treasured up during a lifetime, shake the dust from them, and not find a single thing of any use—nothing to please the eye, all drab and dowdy and poor, unwanted and worthless.

Where then was the cherished treasure that would make life not lived in vain?

How, oh how had it happened that Anna, the beautiful Anna who had it in her to bring people joy, had brought love and joy to none and knew them not herself, and no one loved her!

The pink wizened face of the old choirmaster Schüts floats up before Anna's eyes out of a thick mist. There is a smell of kerosene in the dimly-lit hall of the People's House. It is some kind of holiday—how many round and rosy girlish faces there are, and lads from the most distant farms in navy-blue suits! What a crowd fills the hall today!

Anna keeps a nervous eye on the teacher's baton. Now he has waved it! Whose silvery voice is that soaring triumphantly over the other voices, beating against the windows like

a bird that has flown in from the outside world? Can that be Anna? Yes, of course, it is her voice. She sees joy in the shining eyes of old Schüts, admiration on the faces of the people in the packed hall.

It is a strange song, an old folk song composed in the days of baronial tyranny. A light, airy refrain, but the words are sad:

> Midri—the bird, is ominous:
> Awful its wings of iron,
> Deadly its brass-wrought talons.
> Great is the harm it's done us:
> Pecking our garden currants,
> Rooting up every carnation.

The chorus sings with abandon, but forcefully:

> Deep in the woods has it lost itself...
> Spread out your nets to entangle it.

And Anna, with shining eyes, ready as it were to seize the bird Midri, stands out sharply with her clear and powerful soprano, singing with fervour:

> Spread out your clapnets to capture it.

People had loved Anna then! But she had left old Schüts' choir, had withdrawn from people and thereby ruined her life.

CHAPTER THREE

It's a grand feeling to come back to your old home and take up your work where you left off. But no less joyous is the return to your native parts knowing that you are going to build that home anew from start to finish, from the first porch step to the last brick of the hearth chimney.

What matter that you possess nothing now, not even a best shirt to wear on Sundays, that only the bare necessities are packed away in your knapsack? Why does this not trouble you, whence this joyous and carefree heart, as if you were the happiest man in the world?

You are thirty-two, in the prime of life, returning home a victor from the Great Patriotic War. Life has taught you to have faith in your own powers.

Few of the passengers at the Tallinn station on the narrow-gauge railroad paid any attention that cold December evening to the short, well-knit figure of a man of over thirty wearing an army uniform without the shoulder straps, when he entered the narrow crowd-

ed carriage. Throwing his knapsack up on the shelf, he asked leave of a stout peasant woman in a bright woollen shawl to sit down beside her.

When the man took off his warm army cap, which still bore the clear impress of the star insignia, and slowly unbuttoned his great-coat, he became remarkably like the peasants sitting in the railway carriage. The same rugged, strongly-moulded features with a searching look of guarded interest, and eyebrows and thick hair much fairer than his red weather-beaten cheeks and nose. He sat peasant-wise, too, securely in his seat and slightly hunched, and even lit his cigarette the way they did, carefully shielding the flame of the match in his cupped hands, though there was neither wind nor snow here to guard against.

Few took notice of the man, but he gazed hungrily at everybody with light eyes that seemed to have thawed and warmed in the crowded carriage.

Paul Runge, honourable discharge papers in his pocket, was returning home.

The little steam engine, belching thick brown shale smoke, crawled from station to station, toiled doggedly up inclines and rattled swiftly down the gradients, the narrow boxlike

carriages swaying and throwing passengers against one another as in a streetcar.

The train made long halts at the stations, so long that at one of them a peasant of gigantic stature in a sheepskin jacket, with a fur cap jammed down over his ears, managed to make an unhurried round of all the carriages, addressing to the stuffy warmth behind the open doors one and the same question:

"Is Juku Lukk here?"

Coming to the locomotive, he said in a puzzled tone to the engine driver who had come out for a smoke:

"Juku Lukk hasn't arrived. . . ."

To which the engine driver made reply:

"No, I don't remember seeing him at the station. I guess he'll come tomorrow. . . ."

Paul Runge, observing this scene, smiled to himself. It was all so familiar. There was nothing surprising in the fact that the engine driver knew both Juku Lukk and the giant in the fur cap. The engine drivers here knew passengers who got on at the wayside stations. And the old countrywomen in bright woollen shawls who drove up to the train in sledges drawn by sleek horses knew the engine drivers by sight.

Runge, too, recognized these old women who rode up in rug-covered sledges to meet their relatives, just as he recognized the tidy little stations and the distant village lights twinkling with a homely welcome amid the blue winter fields flanked by copses.

This was home....

Paul Runge's neighbour, a fat jolly farmer broiling in his fur vest, unearthed a bottle from the depths of his bulging knapsack and passed it around the group of men. He ceremoniously offered it to Paul first.

"You've made a long journey," he said good-naturedly.

Paul took a swig, and his spirits rose still higher.

A passenger related the adventures of a forester named Juhan Kilk, a stranger to Paul. The forester thought he had come upon the den of a bear—a little pillar of vapour rose from a snowdrift among the thickets. He reported this to the local millowner, who was a passionate hunter. That gentleman paid a hundred crowns into the treasury for the right to kill the bear. Juhan Kilk led the hunter and his boon companions to the bear's den to secure the bearskin. It turned out, however, that it wasn't a bear breathing under the snow at all—

it was a stream.... The huntsmen drowned their sorrow in liquor. And then the millowner, hearing a noise in the underbrush, caught sight of a bear and discharged his gun at it. But it wasn't a bear, it was Juhan Kilk who had gone aside to relieve himself. The gentleman begged Kilk's pardon for the trouble and tipped him a crown.

"Still, the forester's pants were a hundred times cheaper than a bearskin under the clique*..." the narrator, a bald old man with a vivacious face and a roguish narrowed eye, said with a wink.

Then someone in the carriage struck up a song:

In Vändra woods, in Pärnumaa county,
uhaidee, uhaida,
They shot an old bear and killed him right there,
uhaidee, uhaida...

His neighbours caught up the song, and along with them Paul Runge. Then they sang "The Boatman of Viljandi" and "Kusta Harnessed the White Horse." At the next big station someone brought in another bottle of wine. Everyone took a swig at it and related some

* Name given to the bourgeois Estonian government.

amusing story or incident from life, as befits a convivial company during a journey. Actually, every trifle related here was worth pondering over, for no matter how funny it was, there was always something sad in it, as is often the case in life.

They travelled all night. Many passengers got off during the journey, but others took their place, and as there were many acquaintances among them the company held together.

Day was breaking when the train stopped at Paul Runge's station. He buttoned up his greatcoat and put on his cap.

"Is your farm here?" his neighbour asked him.

"Er-yes . . ." Paul Runge said hesitatingly.

No rug-covered sledge drawn by a sleek stallion met him at the station—he had no one to meet him—but that could not mar his happy mood. His spirits were bright and clear as that sunny December day. He strode quickly down the broad smooth-packed road, gazing about him with a keen, attentive eye. This was a familiar road. . . . Over there, where it forked, stood an ancient half-ruined inn, roughly built of flagstones. Beyond it was a sharp bend with a bridge flung across the narrow little Koordi, and a water mill right at the edge of the road.

Before the war he, Paul Runge, used to come there to mill Kurvest's wheat.

Farther his path took him past the stone building of the old manor—its white colonnade was clearly visible through the winter trees of the park. The park was filled with the merry cries of romping children. "Probably a school here now," Paul surmised. Not far from the grange was the building of the district executive committee; its Red Flag could be seen from the roadway.

"I'll drop in there tomorrow," Paul decided. "Have a look round first. . . ."

He turned off the road, and ten minutes later stood before a squat stone house badly in need of whitewashing. In single-storied flagstone dwellings like this one the squires' housekeepers, gardeners and menials used to live. Paul entered the wide courtyard. The ringing sound of iron being hammered came through the open door of the shed. Fresh horse dung lay steaming under the little window of the cattle shed.

Paul Runge knocked at the heavy door. It slowly swung open, revealing on the threshold a man of medium height with a well-built figure that seemed to be all thews and sinews, holding a pair of tongs. He coolly regarded

the newcomer for a minute or so, then calmly threw over his shoulder into the room:

"Paul Runge has come back. Come in, Paul."

"How do you do, Kaarel Maasalu," Paul said.

It was somewhat smoky in the large, darkish kitchen. A fire crackled in the hearth, round which two women were busy. One of them Paul recognized as Alviina, Maasalu's wife. The other was old Meeta, Kristjan Taaksalu's mother.

The women moved up a chair for the guest.

"I have horseshoes in the fire," Maasalu said with a nod at the tongs. "We're shoeing the horse. I'll soon be finished, don't take any notice of me. Take your coat off, sit down. We'll soon have dinner."

"Go ahead," Paul answered with a laugh. "I'll sit and watch."

He was the same Kaarel. It wasn't his habit to grow excited. He spoke as though they had never parted and had only just sawn up a gigantic pine tree in the Vodja woods where they had worked together all winter on a crosscut saw, felling trees in the white winter thickets. At noon Kaarel, with a glance at the sky, would slap his mittens together and say:

"Time to get the bread out of the bag. We're going to have lunch."

They would place black barley coffee on the smouldering fire, and take a round country loaf, salted fish and a chunk of pork out of the canvas food bag. The bread, which was stale and as hard as a board, they would cut up thick with a sharp Finnish knife, and cut the pork, as salty as codfish, into thin slices. They shared this dry labourer's fare like brothers, washing it down with scalding hot coffee.

Paul passed his eye appreciatively over Kaarel's wiry figure in a workman's jacket of heavy cloth and trousers drawn tight at the ankles. Forgetting to take off his greatcoat, he watched Kaarel thrust the tongs into the fire, deftly pull out a red-hot horseshoe and swiftly begin hammering it out. How that man could work—fell trees, plough, sow! . . .

"Never get it done if I wait my turn at the smith's . . ." Maasalu threw out jerkily as he flung aside the finished shoe. "Why should I, anyway? I can do it myself, with Taaksalu's help. He's in the stable right now. I won't be long. . . . You look fine, though, real fine," he said approvingly, with masculine restraint.

He went out with the horseshoes.

"Forgive him please," laughed Alviina, hastily clearing the table for the guest; it was littered with tools and boxes of nails. "Do you know, even on his wedding day he put on his work clothes—the well pump broke down and he went to repair it.... There's a lot of work, especially now. Are you in Koordi for good?"

"For good," Runge answered slowly, then grew thoughtful, examining the tools on the table.

Maasalu was not detained long. Behind his broad shoulders Paul caught a glimpse of Kristjan Taaksalu's square, laughing face.

"We've shoed him," Maasalu said, throwing the tools with a clatter into a box under the table. "And now for dinner and a chat. Taaksalu's here, and Semidor will drop in. Good...."

Taaksalu, beaming all over with a friendly smile, was loath to release Paul's hand from his own huge paw, chapped and red from the frost. His deep rumbling bass boomed on a suppressed note in the kitchen.

"Well, so you're back again too, eh? That's fine.... Marched thousands of miles but didn't miss Koordi, eh? Ho-ho-ho...."

He broke into a deafening laugh and nudged Paul with his elbow.

"Yes, it's good you've come back," he said when he had calmed down and settled himself on a stool, which creaked under his weight. "If we've managed to fix up that Semidor the unlucky we're sure to fix you up too."

Kristjan's fat cheeks began to swell out and he broke into a laugh again.

"How did you fix him up?" Paul asked with a grin.

"What, don't you know?" Kristjan Taaksalu cried in amazement, as though everyone was bound to know what was going on in the district of Koordi. "He's a farmer. His fields border on ours now. You ask Kaarel."

"Oh, so Semidor the unlucky has become a farmer?" Paul exclaimed in genuine surprise.

"Yes," Kaarel Maasalu briefly confirmed. "We did the ploughing together this autumn. First on our own fields with Kristjan, then on Semidor's."

"Semidor, old boy, is now the owner of half a horse," Kristjan said, his cheeks swelling out again. "No, really, you ask Kaarel. . . ."

"Get along with you," Kaarel said with a frown. "You see, we bought a horse together. Semidor and I," he explained to Paul. "Taaksalu has his own horse, I've got one and a

half counting the one we bought, and Semidor has a half. Three horses between the three of us. We did the ploughing together last autumn—two horses in a plough."

"Semidor was ploughing—" Kristjan threw in. "Once Kaarel and I, we went away and left him alone for an hour. We come back—Semidor's sitting on a rock and the horses are just standing doing nothing. 'Well,' I says to Kaarel, 'I bet you Semidor is out of luck again....' We go up to him and there he is twisting a broken piece of ploughshare in his hand and scratching his head: 'Damned if I know where that blooming rock came from, right in the middle of the path....'"

Kristjan jammed his hat down over his ears, imparted a look of utter bewilderment to his chubby face and mournfully scratched the back of his head. The imitation of Semidor was so lifelike that Paul burst out laughing.

"I suppose the poor fellow got it hot?" he asked.

"Why, no," Kristjan said, wrinkling his nose. "Swearing at him only makes him lose his head more. He's been sworn at all his life. We didn't say a word to him. Forged a new ploughshare at the smith's that same day and carried on as before. If he'd been by himself,

Semidor would probably have sat looking at that rock three days."

Paul pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and offered his companions a smoke. They lit up. Alviina brought a dish of steaming potatoes to the table.

Paul realized that he was hungry.

"How are you getting on here?" he asked, glancing at the smoky ceiling and bare walls of the kitchen.

"Haven't got down to the whitewashing yet—still plenty of rough work to do," Kristjan Taaksalu said in an apologetic sort of way, following his glance. "It's only the first year, you know. . . ."

"We're getting along fine," said Kaarel Maasalu. "We've been given this house. Kristjan lives in the left half, and I in the right. We meet in the middle, in the kitchen—this is where we hold our family councils. Semidor often drops in to see us."

"We seeded the fields last autumn and we've got seed for spring. Got enough grain," Taaksalu flung in.

"So things are coming along?" Paul said, inhaling deeply.

"Yes, life's not bad," Kaarel answered with a nod.

There were footfalls in the passage and the sounds of someone brushing the snow off his boots, then there came a polite tap on the door.

"That's Semidor," Taaksalu said. "He even knocks at his own door. Hasn't got used to it yet. . . ."

Semidor came in, looking the same as always. He wore a crushed old felt hat on his big head; from his bony shoulders hung a shabby shapeless coat that had once been black and was now some nondescript colour. A pair of quick bluish eyes looked out mischievously and not at all despondently from a wrinkled, brick-red little face. It was not at all the face of an unlucky beggar, such as he was reputed to be. A patch of bald crown and tufts of hair at the temples streaked with grey were revealed from under the hat.

"Come home from the distant seas?" he asked Paul in a gay cracked tenor and adroitly seized his hand. "The rigging all in order? Well, that's fine. . . ."

And off he rattled. He said more in a few minutes than Maasalu and Taaksalu in an hour. He took Paul in from head to foot at a glance and even explored him with his hands. He fingered the Medals and the Order on his chest. "What's this—the Red Star? Well, I

say. . . ." He marvelled at the thickness of the soles on the army boots and tapped them approvingly. Even Paul's aluminium cigarette case lying on the table drew his attention. "What's this—aluminium? Did you engrave it yourself? What are these notches here?"

"Each notch is a month of war," Paul explained laconically.

"A lot of 'em," sighed Semidor—"a lot of notches."

Then, catching Maasalu's questioning eye, he stopped short and said hastily:

"I went down to the mill today—everything's all right."

Evidently Maasalu set the tone among these men. No wonder Kristjan Taaksalu repeated after almost every phrase: "Ask Kaarel if you don't believe me. . . ."

"Dinner is served," said Alviina, and they all, with Paul as guest heading the procession, passed into Maasalu's room where a huge dish of mutton garnished with boiled potatoes, turnips and cabbage stood steaming on a clean tablecloth.

"There's no wine, Paul, I'm sorry," Maasalu said regretfully. "As for beer, we'll brew it out of the next harvest. We'll have to wait."

"Just a minute!" Paul said.

He went back into the kitchen and rummaged in his knapsack, returning with a sealed bottle. Alviina laid out glasses. They all watched in silence while Paul filled them, then looked at him silently as he raised his glass.

"I'm a man of few words, like Kaarel here," Paul said solemnly. "There's no need to use a lot of 'em, anyway—just the ones that are best said.... We here are all new settlers on the land, isn't that so? Then let us drink to all of us now sitting here becoming the masters of life in Koordi. Do you get me? Let us drink to the Soviet power that has given us land. *Elagu!*"*

"Elagu!" said Kaarel Maasalu, Taaksalu and Semidor, and they all drank up. Then they fell to work with their knives and forks.

"What have you decided, Paul?" Maasalu asked after a long silence, pushing back his plate. All at the table laid down their forks, for this was the signal for a serious conversation.

"I sent in an application for the Kurvest farm while I was still in the army," Paul said. "I don't know how the district executive committee will look at it...."

* Long live!

"It's a good farm, and good land," Kaarel said approvingly.

"It's fine land," Semidor confirmed enthusiastically. "You should see the well I dug on that land for old Kurvest. He owed me a good bit, and then he palmed off this here hat on me by way of payment."

"Yes, it's not much of a hat," Taaksalu remarked disdainfully.

"It's good land, anyway," Semidor muttered.

"What's going on at the farm now?" Paul asked with interest.

"It's deserted," Kaarel explained curtly. "Anna Kurvest died in the autumn, and Saamu is looking after the place. The fields haven't been sown. But I hear there's another applicant for that farm—it's a choice bit, you know."

"You don't say so!" Paul said, disagreeably surprised. "Who is it?"

"I don't know, they say he's a stranger, comes from the next district. The chairman Janson seems to back him."

"Oh, well," Paul said after a pause, "I guess there'll be room for two of us at the Kurvest farm."

"Of course," Maasalu agreed. "You'll hit it off together, like Kristjan and me. There's

cattle at the farm, and seed. You'll get everything. Enough to make a start. What else can I tell you? If you need any help, just say the word. You know me."

"I know you," Paul said with a nod. "You'll come."

"And don't forget to call me," Kristjan Taaksalu reminded him.

"We'll all come," Martin Semidor said stoutly.

Paul was slightly mellow and in excellent spirits when he set out for the Kurvest farm. He smiled at the thought of the new masters of Jaagu farm. Those two friends—Maasalu and Taaksalu, were men after his own heart. Kaarel Maasalu, his old pal, was a heart of oak. Kristjan Taaksalu was a fine fellow, too, though not so hardy as Kaarel. And now Semidor had joined them. Paul did not know Semidor so well. Semidor hailed from Saaremaa Island, and had first turned up in these parts twenty years before, when he started drilling wells for the farmers. Everyone quickly saw that he was a man hounded by bad luck—that he had been ruined in Saaremaa, had taken to the sea and been shipwrecked, and that rarely did anything he put his hand

to turn out right. He was no luckier in marriage, his wife being a shrew and all his children having died young. The well-to-do farmers were fond of making fun of him but he never seemed to take offence. And now Semidor was on the land. Strange—it was hard to believe.

The Kurvest farm, concealed behind a hedge of firs, looked deserted from afar. Only a single strip of fresh footprints led to the house along the snowbound path.

"I wonder who that was?" thought Paul, trying to step into the tracks.

He was a bit nervous at the thought that he was about to enter a house which would probably soon become his. He peered closely at the living green wall as though expecting to see old Mart come waddling out of it in his stiff officer's top boots. What would Mart say if he saw his former farm hand trespassing on his grounds, and with such thoughts in his head too?

"He'd throw a fit." Paul chuckled at the not unpleasurable thought.

The seemingly deserted farmhouse, however, showed signs of life. A wisp of smoke curled up from the chimney, and upon turning the corner of the house Paul heard a

peal of feminine laughter coming from a window.

"I wonder who that is?" he thought again.

The door flew open at his knock and he was astonished to see the round laughing face of a young woman dressed simply but in town style in a thin green frock. Something about her face struck him as very familiar. The next instant he recognized her.... Her presence here seemed to him a good omen.

"Aino Vao," he said unerringly, "Johannes Vao's daughter."

"Oh, look who's here," Aino cried gaily. "Saamu, Saamu, do you know the guest who's come to see you?"

"Oh, is it a good guest?" Saamu asked with a laugh, getting up from the wide table and turning his face to the visitor.

"How do you do, Saamu—you eternal toiler," Paul said quietly. "Do you recognize me?"

"You're Paul Runge.... Your voice has changed but I recognized it," Saamu said, smiling broadly. "This is a happy day for Saamu, a day of guests. No wonder the magpie chattered this morning...."

Paul's glance wandered over the kitchen. Nothing had changed much, except that every-

thing had lost some of its shine, as though covered with a layer of dust, and cobwebs hung here and there from the ceiling. Saamu could not see them. But everything within reach of his hand—the floor, the windows and the table—was spick and span. Here at this table Paul had sat down to supper with the other farm labourer Jaan, with Saamu and the girls Tilde and Aino. In those days Aino Vao used to tend Kurvest's cows.

Paul voiced these thoughts.

"To be sure," Saamu said eagerly. "You used to sit in the same corner you're sitting now.... You ploughed with a pair of bays, I remember. There's only Antu left now, and he has nothing to do—he's waiting for a new master."

"I'll go and milk the cows for you, Saamu," Aino said, snatching up the milk pail and putting on her sheepskin coat.

She went out humming a song and threw to Paul in passing:

"I'm the mistress here today."

It seemed to Paul that the kitchen grew more dismal and quiet without her round merry face and gay green frock.

"Still managing all by yourself?" Paul asked.

"Yes," Saamu answered simply, "until the future master. He's already been here."

"Oh," Paul's face clouded. "Who?"

"He said his name was Juhan. The district authorities promised him the farm. He slapped me on the back. 'That's all right, old bean,' he said, 'we'll have things humming here again. . . .' But he warned me not to give anything away. 'I'm the master,' he said."

Paul looked out of the window. Aino, with her head thrown back, sped swiftly and lightly toward the cattle shed carrying full buckets of water, and Paul thought that green frock of hers the brightest spot on this dreary farm. He also thought how quickly she had grown to womanhood these last few years. He remembered her before the war a gawky village girl of nineteen. He, Paul, had danced with her at the village parties and sometimes seen her home. What was she doing now?

He asked Saamu.

"Aino? She's flying about looking for a place to build a nest," Saamu said. "She went to town and worked there for a while, and now she's come back. Longs for the land. Here she's paid me a visit and right away goes out to milk the cows. Says she misses it all. It isn't surprising—she was born in Koordi, it's in her

blood. Old Johannes Vao didn't receive her kindly."

"Why?"

"I don't know exactly—" Saamu said with some hesitation. "Most likely because she left home without his permission."

Aino came in with the milk pail and set to straining the milk. Her ringing voice was heard again.

"Well, what am I going to feed you?"

"Pancakes," Saamu solemnly announced, getting up to go for the flour. "On a day like this we ought to make soup with dumplings or else pancakes."

The fire began to crackle in the stove. A white apron appeared on Aino. Her rounded elbows came into swift motion.

Paul, a prey to disturbing thoughts, crossed the room. Thrusting his hands into his pockets he stared out of the window. What a big farm it was! What a cattle shed! Big enough for a dozen cows, and a cattle kitchen attached to it. A barn, cart shed, a well.... Of course, it was all rather neglected just now, but if you tackled it....

"You're looking at the place as if you were the new master," he heard Aino's voice.

"Eh?" He started and frowned. "No, just like that."

She gave him an arch attentive look, as though reading his thoughts.

Saamu slapped his knees and caught up her words:

"And why not? Paul is a master-hand at ploughing. Antu is standing in the stable. Why let it all go to a stranger?"

"Aino ought to try her hand at it," Paul said with amusement.

"I'm a woman, and all alone," Aino answered gravely, "I wouldn't be able to handle it. But if I had a home of my own I'd work my head off—I'd make things hum, I would."

Glancing at her as she vigorously bustled about in front of the stove, Paul could very well believe it.

Dusk fell. Bright patches of light from the hearth danced on the walls, and the kitchen was filled with the savoury smell of frying butter. A pleasant warmth emanated from the hearth.

Lounging lazily in his chair, Paul gazed at Saamu, who was lighting the lamp, and at white Miki, who looked pink in the light of the stove. He looked at Aino's plump white arms as she laid the table and suddenly became

poignantly aware of how he had missed a home during those years of the war, how he had longed for a cosy warm nook of his own and a peaceful life on the land—a life that was probably inconceivable without those warm tender arms.

They sat down at the table. They had soup with dumplings, and then Aino served the pancakes, which they smeared with honey and washed down with rich ice-cold milk.

Listening to Aino's lighthearted chatter and gazing at Saamu's calm, reposeful face, Paul thought that this meeting was not a mere accident. No, it was not an accident. They all three felt happy round the warm hearth of the Kurvest house. What matter that they were all guests here for the time being and none of them had a firm footing in this house—they nevertheless felt themselves to be the masters here.

And Aino once more almost read his thoughts when she asked:

"So you've decided to take land in the district?"

"Yes," he answered, "I have. I'm going to look for it."

"I wouldn't mind either ..." she said frankly, and grew thoughtful.

Saamu said nothing.

"Let's look for something together," Paul said jokingly, but sensing that his words had not sounded like a joke, he was startled.

Feeling Paul Runge's silent heavy glance upon herself, Aino looked up questioningly. He stared at her levelly with rather cold, slightly narrowed eyes and seemed to be perfectly composed but for a queer twitching of the lips that betrayed his agitation. And Aino, noticing this, took his words in earnest. So did Saamu. He sat in silence, with his face averted and a gentle smile on his lips, as though he could see something that was invisible to them.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Paul Runge crossed the threshold of the executive committee of the district Soviet.

Loud voices issued from the chairman's office. An old peasant with a muffler round his neck stood by the half-open door listening to the conversation, his tufted brows significantly raised.

No one took any notice of Paul when he came in. The chairman, a burly man with fleshy lips and nose, and ears pressed close to his skull, sat at a large desk. Paul recognized him as Jaan Janson, a local farmer.

Noticing the visitors in the chairman's office, Paul said to himself in surprise:

"Oho, friends here."

Yes, Maasalu, Taaksalu and Semidor were here, and apparently engaged in a heated conversation. Maasalu, as imperturbable as ever, sat solidly before the chairman's desk. Next to him, supporting him as it were with his powerful shoulder, sat Taaksalu, fumbling impatiently with his fur cap; slightly apart, fidgeting on

a creaking stool, sat Semidor, shifting his gaze alternately from Maasalu to Janson.

"I don't care what you do, but we need superphosphate," Maasalu said determinedly.

"I haven't any super," Janson said loudly, tilting his cap to the back of his head. "I haven't any."

"We can't do without super," Taaksalu boomed. "You know very well what kind of fertilizer we've got this year. It's only the first year we have animals. We haven't any manure. What are we going to fertilize the rye with? You know how things are with us."

"I know, but I haven't any."

"You'll give us some," Kaarel Maasalu said coolly.

"We need it," Taaksalu put in.

"Please, Comrade Janson," Semidor muttered humbly, making a little movement reminiscent of a bow. The expression on Semidor's face changed incessantly. When Maasalu was speaking in his determined tone, Semidor drew himself up on his stool, crossed one shabbily-booted leg over the other with an air of dignity and laid his battered hat on his bony knee. But when Janson raised his sonorous voice Semidor seemed to shrink; he slid to the edge of his stool and put his feet away under it.

"There's only a ton left in the warehouse. One ton for the district. The whole district...." Janson lifted a fat finger and rapped it on the desk.

"You'll give us some," Maasalu repeated. "You gave Mihkel Koor from Karu farm three hundred kilograms yesterday, and you'll give us a hundred each."

Janson's face began to turn purple.

"So what of it? Koor will deliver a ton and a half of grain to the state in the autumn—and you? I bank on Koor to help me fulfil the district plan. You've got to use your head, Maasalu...."

"You are, I see," Maasalu retorted with unutterable irony. "But you'll have to give us fertilizer just the same."

Janson was about to retort, but glancing at Maasalu's stony face he fetched a deep sigh, scratched his powerful neck and called out:

"Martin!"

An elderly man with steel-framed spectacles on a porous nose appeared in the doorway.

"Have a look there—if there's any left write 'em out a hundred kilos of super each."

"There you are," Maasalu said with satisfaction. "Martin and I will just have a look.... You wait for us here," he told Semidor. "You'll

take the order and go straight to the warehouse."

Kaarel Maasalu caught sight of Paul Runge as he passed through the door and threw him a smiling nod. Taaksalu shook hands with him. Janson glanced at Paul and said: "Just a minute," then fixed Semidor with a scowl. He was still simmering.

"You're a fine sprat, too, crawling into the net where you're not wanted. Hooked up nicely, haven't you?"

"Ye-es, but—" Semidor simpered, fidgeting uneasily in his seat, and he cast a timid glance in Paul's direction.

"But what? Fine helpmates you've found yourself, I must say! Maasalu thinks he's very clever—stubborn as a mule. He has one farm, and I have a couple hundred such farms in the district to think of."

"He's stubborn," Semidor muttered, wilting. "Yes, he is. Hard as nails—and harder."

"I wonder how you get along with neighbours like that?"

"D'you think it's easy for me?" Semidor said with growing animation. "Always teaching me—you're not working properly, you're not living properly. What's he, my boss? The big stiff."

Paul, staring at Semidor, could not help smiling. He knew that Semidor the luckless was noted for a total absence of any opinions of his own. He was capable of slinging dirt at what he had but five minutes before been lauding to the skies. His face was a mirror that reflected the mood of his interlocutor, and his tongue wagged acquiescence to the thoughts of all minds stronger than his own.

"Dragging me all over the place, worrying people for nothing," Semidor rattled on, now thoroughly roused and unabashed by Paul's presence. " 'You haven't got any super,' he says to me.... All right, if there isn't any, there isn't. Why kick up a row about it? What's he—poorer than anyone else? And that fellow Taaksalu—both birds of a feather. There's no end of trouble with 'em—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in the laughter of Maasalu and Taaksalu who had come into the room unnoticed. Taaksalu, enjoying the incident immensely, dug his friend in the ribs. Maasalu laughed heartily, baring his even teeth. Paul laughed too, and even Janson smiled grudgingly.

Semidor was not greatly disconcerted. He readily and politely joined the general laughter, and put on his hat.

"So soon?" he asked in surprise. "That's what I call smart."

The three of them went out, and Semidor's muffled voice could be heard saying in the corridor:

"He tried to throw dust in my eyes, the sly fox. Got hold of the wrong man. . . ."

Paul did not catch the rest of the sentence. It was his turn next.

"Runge?" Janson asked, proffering his fat limp fingers to be shaken. "I seem to have heard the name."

Janson's face looked annoyed again after Paul's first words. He scratched his fleshy nose.

"Kurvest farm? Afraid not. We're moving Känd in there, one of the new settlers."

Paul discreetly reminded the chairman that his application had been sent in six months ago, before any other claims had been filed.

"Maybe they hadn't. . . . But what of it?" Janson said, still more displeased. "All you people only think about yourselves, and I have to think about the district. Känd is going to set up an agricultural cooperative—with a tractor, too. D'you understand?"

"I understand all right," Paul slowly acceded. "But the Kurvest farm has about thirty

hectares. There'll be plenty of room for two. The house is also big enough."

"We're going to fix the tractor driver up there too. We'll give you land some other place."

"On the Kurvest farm I could, at a pinch, move into the house of the master's former *pops*,* Kurg," Paul insisted. "No one's living in that cot on the edge of the woods. The main thing is to get a good piece of land."

Janson shifted his cap about on his head with growing irritation.

"That's all you're after, a good thing—you won't have anything bad," he growled. "Well, it's for the land committee to decide.... Drop in in about three days."

Paul saluted by force of habit and walked out. He was not at all pleased with such a start. "Whom else can I apply to?" he thought, then made up his mind. "I'll go and see the Party organizer."

Mounting the narrow staircase to the attic,

* An agricultural labourer living on his master's land; he had to work off for his master on very onerous conditions the right to build himself a dwelling (a cot), cultivate a patch of land for his own use and send his cow to pasture with the master's herd.

Paul knocked on the door and walked into a small, well-heated room. A fair-haired man of middle age laid aside some papers and raised a pair of deep-set eyes to Paul with a questioning look.

"Sit down," he said surveying Paul with interest. "My name is Muuli, let's get acquainted."

Paul sat down and gave a brief account of himself and his plans of settling in the district. He spoke with some resentment of the stand Janson had taken.

"I see," said Muuli, toying thoughtfully with a pencil.

A child's lisping voice could be heard through the narrow door leading into the next room:

"Mummy, what does the soldier man want?"

"He wants to become a farmer," a thin feminine voice answered softly.

"His family," thought Paul and took a look around. There were many signs that the office also served the Party organizer as his apartment. In one corner stood a suitcase with a strap round it. Muuli's little library on the shelf reminded Paul of a battalion Party organizer's field library. In fact, the Party organizer him-

self, with his lank hair neatly parted and his lean clean-shaven cheeks strongly reminded Paul of an army Party organizer, although he was in civilian dress.

"So you want the Kurvest farm, eh?" Muuli suddenly said with a twinkle of amusement, still gazing at Paul with frank interest, while deep wrinkles radiated around his eyes. "I've seen that farm—it's a good bit of pie. . . ."

"I'm only thinking of black bread just now," Paul Runge answered with dignity.

"Don't be angry," Muuli said, adopting the familiar "thou," and he grew grave. "I was only teasing you. But why the Kurvest land and no other?"

"Because I worked there for two years as a farm hand. It's good land, and it'll be easier for me to get on my feet there."

"That's important, of course," Muuli said. "But you must agree that Janson is right too—we need a machine cooperative, it's important for everybody. But don't you worry, you'll get land, and not the worst either."

Paul accepted the proffered cigarette. He felt cheered. Muuli began to talk about the army. So he, Runge, had been in the infantry, a scout even? An honourable service. He, Muuli, had also served in the Estonian corps of the Red

Army, but in the artillery. Yes, they would have their work cut out for them here....

He fell silent, drumming on the table with his fingers, then said musingly:

"There are very few active men down at Koordi. And they're mostly like Tatrik and Vao—not the real kind.... All right then, you fix yourself up for the time being. We'll soon be seeing each other."

He stood up and held his hand out to Paul.

"I don't like to disturb people too often," Paul said with a smile.

"That's all right, you'll come," Muuli answered with a surprisingly merry laugh that sent the wrinkles running out again around his eyes. "You simply won't be able to get along without me."

Upon leaving the Party organizer, Paul, after a moment's hesitation, turned towards the Kurvest farm. He whistled to himself as he walked. He was in an excellent frame of mind. He had definitely taken a liking to Muuli.

"He's as keen as they make 'em," thought Paul. "He has the proper grip—knows what he's after. I'm sure he must have been Party organizer in some regiment."

In any case, he had reason to be satisfied with his first day's successes. Who cared for

Janson's wry face and apparent unfriendliness if he could count on Muuli and rely on the friendship of Maasalu and Taaksalu? And then there was something else? Ah, yes, Johannes Vao's daughter—Aino.... She strode swiftly across the farmyard, her head held high and defiant, and the winter wind whipped the green frock about her firm legs. You wouldn't be down in the world with a girl like that.

He quickened his pace as he drew near the farm.

Aino was a guest again at Saamu's. The fact did not surprise Paul; he took it as though it had been prearranged.

"You look as if you've found a lucky horseshoe," she said.

"Who can tell? Perhaps I have," he answered mysteriously.

"What's the news?" Saamu asked.

"A bit vague yet," Paul answered laconically. He did not like to speak of half-achievements.

He had dinner here, in the course of which he grew more talkative. For Aino he even related, though none too well, several anecdotes from army life. Merry anecdotes were not his forte. But Aino laughed nevertheless. He liked

that. "She's easily amused," he thought, "that means it's hard to make her cry."

And once more Aino's bare elbows began moving busily and she sang pensively with lowered eyes:

Long for a glimpse of my love do I crave,
Far is the road to her, over the wave,
Deep is the lake that is barring the way,
Parting us, lovers, for many a day.
Oh, for some planks, for a saw, that would make
Quickly a boat to pass over the lake.
But—if you're longing your sweetheart to woo—
Surely you'll know how to build a canoe!

"I'm leaving tomorrow—will you come and see me off?" Aino said, breaking off the song he liked so much.

His face clouded. "Tomorrow? Why so soon?"

"Just like that. I don't like things at home. We can't get along, old Vao and I," she complained.

"Can't you put it off for a day or two?"

"Why?" she asked naively, looking him squarely in the face. "Will anything be different?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it will. Today there's a frost and when you wake up in the morning it may thaw," he answered evasively.

It was not so easy to draw Paul out.

He went to Maasalu to spend the night.

The men gathered in Maasalu's room. The host took his boots off and sat with his feet in thick woollen socks stretched under the table, smoking a pipe. Taaksalu was cutting tobacco with a homemade gadget. Semidor was there too; drawn up before the warm stove, he sat scratching a lean black cat behind the ear.

Paul gave a brief account of his meetings with Janson and Muuli.

"Janson wants to cross the river without getting his pants wet," Maasalu said scornfully. "All he cares about is His plan being fulfilled. What does he care if you're a poor man and a new settler on the land? He banks on Koor, if you please. Koor is going to help him out with State deliveries. And then a cooperative's got to be set up—so he fishes out this Känd fellow from somewhere or other. I'd like to see what sort of a Känd* this one is, and where his roots run. . . ."

"Janson's a louse," broke in Semidor. "But I took him down a peg or two. The fertilizer's in our shed now."

Maasalu gave Semidor a withering look, and Taaksalu openly grinned.

* Känd means tree stump.

"You hang on to the Kurvest land by your teeth," Maasalu said to Paul. "You'll build yourself a house, and meantime you can live in the cot. Pops Kurg lived in it, didn't he? Whichever way they share the farm you're sure to get five or six hectares of ploughland. Fine land it is, like fresh bread! One good crop will build you a house."

"I'll get the water up in the well—it's dried up, I know that well," muttered Semidor.

With that they called it a day.

Paul could not fall asleep for a long time. He lay listening to the light snores of Kaarel, who slept the sound sleep of a healthy man after a hard day's work. Now and then the old walls of the house creaked, like an old man stretching his limbs with a grunt. The cat's eyes, green and bright as winter stars, lit up in the darkness and floated past him.

Lying with open eyes, Paul tried to imagine what his life would be like in the near future—in a month, two months, a year. This was as difficult as trying to make out the cat in the darkness. For he was not following the beaten track but was beginning life anew, as it were. He, Paul Runge, the master of a farm and of his own cows and horses! It staggered belief. He had never owned a farm in his life.

CHAPTER FIVE

The old clock on the wall, with a brass pendulum that resembled a steelyard, struck the hour and woke Mihkel Koor, the master of Karu farm. The strokes sounded muffled, as though drowned in the thick quilt under which lay Mihkel and his wife Marta. The sound was deadened by the profusion of furniture and of homespun rugs that covered the floor and walls of the large low-ceilinged room. The furniture was unmatched. Next to a triple-door oak wardrobe stood another wardrobe of birchwood with tasteless carved posts and ornaments; the birchwood wardrobe was the same age as the clock, which had belonged to Mihkel's grandfather, the miller Otto. If you were to rummage in the tightly-packed wardrobes you would find grandfather's old sheepskin hat and father's new top boots which had never yet been worn, as well as many other things that had belonged to the father and grandfather. Things were hoarded at this farm from generation to generation. Nothing was thrown away, not even grandfather's old onion of a

watch in a wooden case, though something had long ago gone wrong with the works, and the time it showed belonged to the beginning of the century. Things in this house were collected steadily, in proportion to the flour from thousands of farmers' bags that had settled into grandfather's own bags, in proportion to the patches of land that father Jakob had bought up at auctions and securely sewed on to the Karu farm.

Now, everything that had belonged to his grandfather and father was Mihkel's. Everything, that is, except the land, a large part of which had gone over to the reserve lands of the district.

Mihkel glanced sideways at his wife's bare shoulders, which had noticeably filled out. She had her face buried in the pillow. Sleeping.... But back there, in the home of her father, Johannes Vao, Marta probably had never slept till eight in the morning. Remarkable how people's habits change after a few years of prosperous life behind the protection of a strong man's back.... So thought Mihkel Koor with annoyance. Nobody demanded that Koor's wife should rise with the farm hand Roosi, but still....

Hawking loudly, Mihkel lowered his lean, stringy legs over the side of the broad low bed

and slowly dressed himself. He washed in the kitchen in cold water, snorting into his hands. Then he combed his hair before a dim mirror hanging above the basin. That did not take much time, for his hair grew only on the temples and at the back of his head. Koor was no youngster, being on the shady side of forty, but he was still strong and healthy. You could not call his appearance pleasant, what with his beady eyes, sunken temples, high cheekbones and skin drawn taut over the face. Because of his face, or perhaps not only because of his face, Mihkel Koor was nicknamed "hungry Mik." He knew it, and heartily hated Kristjan Taaksalu to whom he owed the nickname. What if they did have some unsettled score of their own on account of a bag of oats he owed him for work done—at least, that was what Taaksalu claimed—it didn't give him the right to make fun of him.

The girl Roosi came in, pink from the frost, with an armful of wood. She carefully laid it out before the stove, trying not to make a noise.

"Well, how is Lulli?" Mihkel asked, remembering the ewe that had lambed the day before. As this ewe was of a good breed, she had a proper name of her own.

"The lambs are suckling," Roosi answered.

"They'd better," Mihkel growled.

He reminded himself while looking at Roosi that he had long promised Johannes Vao a lamb from Lulli. Johannes had long been asking for one—his breed had gone bad. As a matter of fact, no one in the village had a breed of sheep like Mihkel Koor's. Mihkel had promised him a lamb several times, but had not kept his word. This time, maybe, he would keep it. Maybe....

"Fire the stove," he said, gazing thoughtfully at Roosi, "and then I'll tell you something."

Roosi got busy at the stove. When the faggots flared up, she filled the cauldrons with water, and only after that did she make a step towards the master, lowering her eyes with a guilty air. She stood now before Koor, big and awkward, in wooden clogs—she had come straight from the cattle shed—and her big hands shook visibly. Her hands always shook for some reason when Mihkel Koor looked at her, and she always tried to hide them under her soiled apron or thrust them under her greasy sheepskin jacket. And her face at such times always wore a guilty air, though she had not committed any offence.

Mihkel eyed her in thoughtful silence, scratching his bristly chin with his fingernail. What a fool the girl was! Shoulders and neck like a man's, strong as an ox—born to handle sacks—and her hands shook like a sheep's tail. "What a clod," Mihkel thought derisively.

"Well, how about the land? Are you going to take it?" he asked with curiosity. "You've got to make up your mind."

"I don't know—" Roosi said quietly, twisting her neck in great distress.

"Who knows then?" he said with a shrug. "They'll share it all out, and it'll be too late—look how many applicants there are. It's land for nothing. You're not such a fool as to tend my cattle when you can have a farm of your own. Imagine Roosi with a cow and horse. And her own cattle shed, and a cot to live in, with a flowerpot on the window, eh? And your own crop on the field. . . ."

From the way Roosi's eyes dropped under his searching gaze and her hands shook still more violently under her apron, Mihkel realized that the girl had probably been thinking of this before, perhaps more deeply than he supposed.

Mihkel smiled.

"Then what's the matter? You have the

chance. I'll talk it over with Johannes Vao—he's on the committee—and write the application for you. My land's too much for me—we'll cut you off six hectares of it. And they'll give you another three from the district lands. It's not bad land, that adjoining ours. I'm telling you this because I feel sorry for you. If you don't take it, others will. There's Paul Runge nosing around.... You're one of the family in a manner of speaking."

"I'm willing," Roosi said quickly, and something flitted across her face that Mihkel did not like at all—a reflection of inner joy which she tried hard to conceal.

"You'll leave my house, of course, you'll be your own mistress," Mihkel went on in a level voice. "You wouldn't want to stay yourself, would you? My cattle sheds wouldn't suit you, you'll want to have your own. And your own seed, and horse and plough.... Isn't that so?"

Roosi's head slowly drooped and an expression of hopelessness crept into her face. She said nothing. Mihkel, too, fell silent. He ought not to discourage Roosi too much. No, he ought not.

After a long pause Mihkel rapped the table with the flat of his hand.

"Well, look here then. After all, we've been living in the same house for five years, eating the same bread. I'll help you. Take the land! All right, you'll live a year with me, so be it, until you get fixed up—I understand your position. I think I owe you two years' pay, don't I? Very well, I'll give you a cow and we'll be quits. You can't call that a bad deal. Better have my cow than the scraggy beast the district will try to palm off on you. As for seed, I'll give you a loan—we'll come to terms.... Well, is it a go?"

Mihkel tossed his head and shot out a long arm. Roosi nervously and awkwardly placed her hard broad hand in his palm.

Marta, coming bareheaded into the kitchen, saw this and overheard the last words.

"Once you're giving her a cow you might as well throw in a horse," she said sarcastically, curling her full lips and narrowing her sleep-swollen eyes.

"Go and wake up," Mihkel answered contemptuously.

In the evening Koor paid a visit to his father-in-law.

A two-litre tankard of beer and a tin of tobacco stood on the rough clean-scoured

kitchen table between Mihkel and Johannes Vao. The beer was dark, almost black, and very thick—sticky when some of it got on the fingers, and firing the blood when it reached the stomach. Johannes was a past master at brewing beer, and he did not, let it be said, treat every guest to it.

They talked of many things as they slowly sipped the beer, and it was difficult to say what was of most importance in this conversation and what was just idle talk. They argued about how much hops had to go into beer, and spoke about lambs.

"You can count one from Lulli as yours. Choose any one you like," Mihkel promised generously.

They discussed spring prospects. Old Tatrik, by some signs of his own, had predicted a dry summer.

"Old Tatrik hasn't got the nose he used to have," Johannes said weightily. "He's grown old."

Mihkel agreed.

"I can tell you this, though," he said significantly. "The man with grain is the strong one. There's nothing dearer than grain these days."

"Yes, grain's high," Johannes agreed.

"Grain's dear," Mihkel went on, pursuing his train of thought, "but land is cheap—anyone can have it who wants it, for nothing.... And grain may grow cheaper."

After which mysterious statement he looked significantly at Johannes and began rolling himself a cigarette.

"Yes, anybody can have land just for the asking," Johannes agreed, striking the lighter and holding it out to his son-in-law.

"How about the Kurvest land, have you already decided?" Mihkel asked casually. "I hear some more applicants have turned up—Runge?"

"Yes, there are two applications. We'll go into the matter," Johannes said with an air of some importance.

"Well—and what do you think about it?"

"What's there to think? The farm's big enough for two. We'll see...."

"That's right—for both of them," Mihkel said with a broad grin. "If you ask me, give preference to the more useful man. Runge's looking for something cushy to fall into and won't be worth a fig to the village, but Känd is giving the cooperative a tractor."

"A tractor's not a bad thing," Johannes said approvingly. "We'll be provided for at threshing time."

"Put Runge in Kurvest's house and I wouldn't be surprised if he takes the shine out of you in a couple of years. You've worked your head off on this farm all your life. And he'll come without a shirt to his name, get everything for nothing and in two or three years' time you'll be the first to take your hat off to him. Is that fair?"

Johannes was silent. As a matter of fact, in his heart of hearts he did feel his vanity somewhat pricked by such a prospect, and he was a man by no means lacking in vanity. Only he wondered in what way this concerned Mihkel. Johannes looked thoughtfully at his son-in-law from under knitted brows, pinched his shaggy eyebrows and began to wind the overhanging grey hairs on his finger.

"Of course, you can give him land, but not the best," Mihkel went on meanwhile. "What's wrong with the Kurg farm? It's on Kurvest's land, isn't it? Let him show what he's made of there. Yes . . ." he suddenly remembered, and rubbed his hard square jaw. "My Roosi wants to take land too. She's written an application."

"Where?" Johannes asked with interest.

"You see—six hectares of my land, between the old melioration canal and the alder grove."

"She wants that?" Johannes said, astonished. "Why, that's a swamp."

"Not at all. It's a pasture," Mihkel corrected him. "What's wrong with it—isn't it land? And another four hectares from the reserve lands, that wedge between my land and Tatrik's meadow. It's good land—hasn't been touched for two years. What do you say to it? After all, I take an interest in Roosi, she's been with me a long time."

Johannes slowly raised the mug to his mouth and leisurely sipped the viscous beer. That released him from an immediate reply. Johannes avoided committing himself to definite promises and to giving prompt answers. Hence, the farmers said that Johannes was not so good at speaking as he was at keeping silent. Haste was only useful in catching fleas. Better to answer when you thoroughly understand what it is all about. And not every man could be understood right away, not even his son-in-law. That talk about "taking an interest" Johannes had simply let slip by unheeded. What was the idea—they weren't in church, were they? One thing at least he understood,

and having understood, he could not but wonder at his son-in-law's cunning. The latter was cutting down his land by about a quarter, getting rid of the worst fields and at the same time avoiding a higher rate of taxation. Possibly there was something else behind it. But if Roosi agreed, and his son-in-law himself wanted it....

"Of course, if we give her another four hectares from the reserve lands, that's another matter," Johannes said weightily, setting down the mug with a thump. "That's another matter.... To be sure, let Roosi hand in an application."

CHAPTER SIX

Johannes Vao had not roamed about the neighbouring woods several hours for nothing. He had finally succeeded in hunting down a sizable hare in the dense aspen grove bordering upon Snake Swamp. He sat down on a tree stump to rest, then tied up the still warm fleecy carcass in his knapsack, slung his old fowling piece, which smelt of gunpowder from the recent shot, over his shoulder and made for home. The spongy snow on the fringe of the woods had stiffened and hardly gave way under his feet.

He walked along pleased with himself and the successful hunting. That stupid hare! Skipped out straight under the muzzle—must have been half-asleep!

The master of Vao farm could occasionally go out and do some shooting. Of course, not every farmer in Koordi could afford that luxury, even in the winter. Though there were no specially important jobs in the winter, there were plenty of things to do in a small way, such as bringing in the hay from the

swampy meadows, or carting home firewood from the forest or mending the sledge or cart. It was good to have a big family and three grown-up daughters—a real help they were—and a wife like Liina to look after the house. All you had to do was give orders and see to it that the household was kept busy. The younger girls, Linda and Vilma, could bring in the hay, and the eldest, Valve, could be sent to the woods. The girls could do all that as well as their father—it wasn't like ploughing the land. The work only did them good. No wonder people in the village said that Johannes Vao's daughters were handy about the house, and able to ply a knitting needle and, what was most praiseworthy, were dutiful girls who respected their elders. No wonder Johannes' two elder daughters had married well and become mistresses of big farms. And say what you like, it was a very pleasant thing to have rich farmers like Mihkel Koor for sons-in-law. It was a pity that of all his six daughters only Aino marred the integrity of the family—like an intractable sheep that breaks away from the fold. She was the most hard-working of his daughters, but also the most ungovernable. And how much unpleasantness she had caused Johannes when she went away

to live in town without his leave. People in the village were only glad of the opportunity to wag their tongues and find entertainment in dissensions in a neighbour's family, all the more so in such a united and closely-knit family as his was. What did the girl lack? One would think Johannes was a kind of despot in the family if his own daughter had chosen to quit it.

The fringe of the forest brought Johannes out on a country lane which was very rarely used in the winter. A pair of wretched-looking structures stood out darkly within half a mile of the forest's edge—a house and a cattle shed. From a distance they looked like huddled cots with a draw well between them. Such wells had not been dug in these parts for many years—people nowadays used pumps. The fields of the Kurvest farm began here. A long time ago pops Kurg had built these wretched huts on the land of Mart's father, Karl Kurvest. Several pops had lived here after Kurg but nobody had stayed long—it was no easy thing to work for the Kurvests and get along with them. The farmstead gradually fell into a state of dilapidation. Among the people it was known as Crane farm, from the name of its first owner, Kurg.*

* Kurg means crane.

Kurg's farm was now to receive a new master—Paul Runge, Kurvest's former labourer. Johannes Vao, one of the members of the district land committee, had only yesterday signed that decision with his own hand. True, Runge had wanted to move into Kurvest's house and not Kurg's cot. But apparently the chairman of the committee, Tammik, wished to grant the other new settler, Känd, every possible privilege, and all because people in the district looked on Känd as the future chairman of the new machine cooperative. Vao completely agreed with the land committee chairman, and not because he counted so much on Känd's tractor—no, not because of that. He simply did not like the idea of a poor man like Runge becoming the master of the rich Kurvest farmstead and getting in one sweep what Johannes Vao had been working for all his life and not succeeded in getting. Who knows but that in two or three years Runge might become richer than he, Johannes Vao. Runge had received quite enough as it was—eleven hectares of good land, a cow and seed. What more did he want? Let him build the house and cattle shed himself if he called himself a worker and a man. He wanted too much of a good thing! The third member of

the committee, land surveyor Nirku, didn't care who moved into the Kurvest farmstead—Känd or Runge, so long as they put through the agrarian reform in the district as soon as possible and fixed the bounds of the plots. He therefore fell in readily with the decision of Tammik and Vao.

Johannes, surveying the dismal deserted structures, stopped in surprise and stepped behind the sparse willow bushes. A man and a woman were walking straight across the field towards the derelict farm. What the devil! So they were, and hand in hand too. The man in the greatcoat could only be Paul Runge. And by the defiant tilt of her head and her firm stride Johannes recognized the woman to be his daughter Aino.

Johannes thrust his hand in his pocket to consult his pipe.

The two came up to the house and walked slowly all around it. Then they sat down on the edge of the well and began looking at the house. They looked so long that Johannes had time to fill his pipe, light it and smoke it half out. People look that way at a thing that has greatly caught their fancy—something they are very keen on acquiring but are not sure they can afford.

Old Vao spat, thrust the lighted pipe back into his pocket and strode off down the road without a further glance at the farm.

He had the feeling someone had stolen a march on him and cheated him. But who? Could it be Mihkel Koor, he wondered? But what did Koor have to do with it? And that damned girl! Not enough that she had disgraced him in the eyes of the whole village by leaving home—she was now carrying on with this Runge fellow. A pretty situation this—one daughter married to Mihkel Koor, the wealthiest man in Koordi, and the other the mistress of Crane farm in the very same village. Imagine how tongues would now wag and what fun people would poke at Johannes. . . .

Vao spat again in disgust. There was nothing he feared more than ridicule, this stolid, respectable man with the bull neck.

And might not things have turned out better? Might not Runge, damn it, have moved into the Kurvest house, if he, Johannes, had known?

He strode gloomily into the house and flung the hare on the cement floor of the kitchen without saying a word. Then, wheezing angrily, he hung his fowling piece on a nail.

"What's the matter?" Liina asked in surprise.

"Nothing," he snapped.

"There's a fire in the stove—will you skin it?" Liina asked.

"I'll skin that hussy!" Johannes shouted angrily.

"What hussy? What are you talking about?" his wife said, staring.

"The one who's going to be mistress at Crane farm and Paul Runge's wife," Johannes said viciously.

Liina stared blankly at her husband. "Who's that?"

"Who's that? Your Aino!"

Liina threw up her hands and plumped down on a stool.

"Aino at Crane farm?"

The rosy faces of Linda and Vilma peeped in at the door, but upon catching sight of their father they instantly disappeared.

Johannes would ordinarily have hung the hare from the ceiling, slit the skin down the paws and peeled off the soft winter coat with its funny white fluffy tail by drawing it over the head. Liina would have cut up the little carcass, placed the pieces in a deep frying pan, sliced up ringlets of pungent onion, laid little cubes of pork fat thickly about the tender meat, peppered it and put it into the oven. The

shaggy little paws she dried. They were so convenient for greasing and polishing boots.

But both Johannes and Liina had forgotten about the hare.

Johannes, wheezing angrily, went out into the yard.

"Is that the way to chop wood?" he bellowed, seeing Vilma making ineffectual efforts to cope with a knotty log. He snatched the axe out of her hands and began to chop the tough birch stump, grunting with every blow.

After chopping up a large pile of firewood and working himself into a sweat, he flung the axe aside and went back into the house.

"Here.... Get all Aino's rags together and pack 'em in a suitcase," he said to Liina in a gruff but calmer voice. "And put it over there."

He pointed to the doorway. Liina began to cry. Johannes picked the hare up by its hind paws to finish his hunter's job.

Paul Runge did not know that old Johannes had seen him with Aino on their way to Kurg's farm, neither did he have any inkling of the great interest which his appearance on the fields of the Kurvest farm had aroused in Mihkel Koor and others.

Paul and Aino did not notice Johannes because they were too preoccupied with their own affairs. Hands clasped, they walked straight across the snow-covered meadow.

"There isn't even a road leading to our farm," Paul said, and they both laughed, although there was nothing amusing in it.

"The path runs more to the right, at the edge of the meadow," Aino said. "When you have a horse he'll lay down a wide rut. For the time being we don't even need it. Does a bird need a path to find its nest?"

They laughed again merrily, and Paul suddenly threw his arm around Aino and kissed her on the neck. She struggled laughingly to free herself, but rather feebly. (Johannes saw all this from behind the bush when he lit his pipe.)

The house with its untenanted log walls stood out blackly against the white snow. It occupied a bare site, exposed to all the winds, and only on one side did two old birch trees and some sparse bushes nestle against it. Paul and Aino walked around the house. It was a low dwelling, built like a bathhouse. Two little windows faced the south, and one the east. Before the half-open besmutted door lay a slab of flagstone buried in the snow.

They sat down on the snowy frame of the well. Paul peered down.

"There's no water in it," he muttered, "as Semidor said. I'll have to cart it up in a barrel from the stream."

"You'll make a sledge," Aino agreed. "The stream isn't far off. That's nothing. What about the cow house?"

She pulled at the door, but it was heavily snowed up. Paul had to help her. They entered the cold darkness with its faint smell of reeking straw and wood rot.

"They haven't even left a drop of manure," Paul said in chagrin. "But we can fix up the horse and cow here for the time being. I'll just have to make a stall and feeding cribs, yes, and patch up the door—see, it's crooked, it doesn't shut."

"Here in the corner we'll have a pigling," Aino cried delightedly.

And he seemed to see her eyes shining in the darkness.

"Yes, there'll be room," Paul agreed. "Come along."

The shed adjoining the cow house had no door at all. Bars of light streamed in through the gaps between the boards. On the floor, covered with moldering sawdust and the ref-

use of tree bark, lay a dilapidated broad peasant sledge, a toothless rake and a battered chopping block. Not a thing more.

"Here we have a sledge," Paul said, livening up and placing his foot on the crosspiece. "Perhaps we'll draw wood on it yet, eh?"

"Let's go in the house," Aino said, pulling him by the sleeve. "Into our little home," she added with a laugh.

They stepped over the threshold. The door in the little passage opened straight into the room. It was the only room. It had a fireplace in it with a black smoky hearthstone. A snowdrift lay white on the floor under the window, blown in through the broken window frame. Aino rushed to the cooking stove.

"The main thing is it shouldn't smoke," she said anxiously, groping for the dampers and pulling them out. A bunch of straw appeared in her hand. She lit it and shoved it into the stove. The blue wisp of smoke went up the flue and then swept back into the room.

"Never mind, it'll be all right when it burns up," Paul reassured her, noticing Aino's distressed face. "Perhaps a brick has come loose in the chimney. That's easily fixed."

He took long strides down past the smoky walls—five paces wide, and seven paces long;—

the floor boards creaked underfoot. He jotted down something in a notebook he took out of his pocket.

"The floor," he said curtly, "needs relaying. I could do with five or six two-inch boards.... We'll cover the walls with cardboard, it'll be warm and light. You'll see. We fixed up such living quarters at the front, even underground, in a matter of three days—you'd hardly believe it. And here we've got the walls and a ceiling."

He sat down right on the floor with an air of contentment and lit a cigarette. Aino went up to him.

"But Paul, we haven't even got a table or chairs," she said softly. "I can't imagine how it's going to be."

He looked up into her face and burst out laughing.

"We'll think up something," he said knowingly. "I'll go to town and hunt up Johannes Uustalu. Don't you know Johannes Uustalu? He's a great builder—taught me how to handle the axe and the plane. Some of my tools are still with him. If I find him, everything will be all right."

Aino sighed.

"What is it?" he asked in a puzzled tone.

"Nothing," she answered, with a faint blush. "Saamu says that even salted fish is sweet when you share it with your beloved. But—"

"But white bread is better," he prompted with a smile.

"That's not it. . . . To move into this house we've only got to light a fire in the stove, but to raise a crop we need a great deal. Who's going to help us? My father won't."

"No, of course not," Paul said grimly, getting up and staring thoughtfully out of the window.

"Our help lies here," he said.

Aino went up to him, but she saw nothing except the bare fields covered with snow—fields that stretched to the forest.

"That is our help," he said with a thrilled smile. "The land. . . . Those who gave it to us will help us further."

CHAPTER SEVEN

January 1946 came in with thaws and with moist warm winds from the sea. Then a sudden frost struck, a heavy snowfall covered the fields and forests, and bright frosty days set in.

The farmsteads of Koordi village on the fringes of the woods stood snowbound and quiet, looking exactly like their counterparts on the Christmas postcards of Päts* days—dreamy blue night over the snowy roofs of the farms nestling amid the dark fir trees, a cosy, peaceful light glowing in the windows and narrow paths in the snow running from farm to farm.

The life that now flowed within the walls of these quiet farms was not such a dreamy one, however.

A new life with all its flurry and interests was invading the peaceful farmsteads and drawing all their inhabitants into its maelstrom, no matter how remote the farm was from the headquarters of the district Soviet where the chairman Janson practically shout-

* President of bourgeois Estonia.

ed himself hoarse at the telephone, swearing at the chairmen of the village Soviets because of the slow progress in lumbering work, issuing instructions to the village Soviet representatives and reporting to the county centre.

While Janson was letting himself go at the telephone, Peeter Tatrik, a lubberly farmer on a short pair of legs, with a Finnish fur cap pulled low over his eyes, was ploughing through the snowdrifts to the distant farm of Meisterson and cursing Janson because the latter had not yet got around to appointing another representative of the village Soviet to help him out. It was a downright shame—one man dealing with sixteen farms, and all of them so far apart! He said himself that the limit was ten....

A dog barked and tugged fiercely at its chain.

Meisterson, a tall, lean, bald-headed farmer with spectacles on a long birdlike nose, opened the door into the kitchen, where it smelt of warm bread and milk and where the mistress was carding wool.

"Well, what have you got to say?" Meisterson asked after an exchange of opinions regarding the weather.

"Same as usual," Tatrik said blandly. "Tomorrow's a *Voskresnik* for carting timber out of the woods. You have to cart out eighty cubic metres, and you haven't even done half yet."

"And I was thinking of driving down to the market tomorrow to sell some pigs," Meisterson frankly admitted with a sigh.

"You'd think they couldn't do without our Jaan," the mistress of the house put in.

"Seems they can't," Tatrik answered, mopping his brow with a huge handkerchief. "Janson's got a representative from the county sitting in his office these two days. And his car is standing in the yard. I guess he wouldn't come down just for nothing. Isn't that so?"

"What the devil is all that timber wanted for?" Meisterson muttered.

"It's needed.... The Germans wrecked half of Tallinn, and Tartu and Narva. You don't expect to leave 'em in such a state," Tatrik argued, spreading his hands. "Besides, I hear they're building factories on the schists at Kohtla-Järve—a whole new town. D'you think they won't need a lot of timber there?"

"And I was thinking of going up to market," Meisterson repeated, thoughtfully scratch-

ing his nose. "The pigs have just about grown to right size."

"No, Meisterson, you've got to be at the *Voskresnik* tomorrow, say what you like. Don't you see, you'll be offending me and the authorities by not going."

Tatrik threw out his chest under the open sheepskin coat with an air of dignity. Meisterson thoughtfully eyed the badge of the representative of the village Soviet attached to the lapel of his jacket. Tatrik wasn't a bad sort, a good-natured fellow—Meisterson knew him inside out, just an ordinary farmer like himself, and all of a sudden—he was an authority.... As one of his neighbours he could simply send Tatrik to hell, but with the Soviet authorities it was quite another thing. He wouldn't like to quarrel with them. Why should he? Didn't they wipe off his arrears in nineteen forty, and didn't they grant him an extra five hectares of land? And then this year, didn't he receive fertilizer and doesn't he intend exchanging his seed for graded seed? ...

"Perhaps I won't go to the fair?" he asked his wife. "What do you say, Salme?"

Salme did not answer, knowing that her husband asked merely for the sake of form and would follow his own devices.

"Even those are going who aren't obliged to," Tatrik said. "Jaagu farm is all turning out—Maasalu, Taaksalu and Semidor."

"So be it," Meisterson said, slapping his knees. "My horse is no worse than those on Jaagu farm."

And Tatrik, taking his leave, set off along the snow path for the next farm.

The lights in Koordi shone in the same places and the same windows where men's fathers and grandfathers had always been accustomed to see them, but many of these farms were occupied by new masters. Thus, Jaagu farm, which had once belonged to the innkeeper Mergel, was now occupied by two poor men—Maasalu and Taaksalu. Life at Jaagu farm gave the farmers much food for discussion, for they looked upon this fellowship as something new and unusual in Koordi, something that ran counter to its traditions. Cases had been known before in the district when two farmers lived together and helped each other, but they had invariably been bound by ties of kinship. And here were two farmers who were not at all related—and a third had joined them, too, Semidor the luckless. Many jokes were made on this account. As it was difficult to conceal anything in a village

consisting of a score or so farms, everything that went on at Jaagu farm was common knowledge. Everyone knew how Semidor had smashed the ploughshare on a rock at the very first tillage, how, with Maasalu's help, he had become the owner of half a horse, and how some artful fellow at the market had contrived to sell him a one-eyed pig.

Gradually, however, the topics for jokes were exhausted. The three men at Jaagu farm held together securely, and it was evident from the very start that things there would go swimmingly. This was felt even in Semidor's deportment—he no longer encouraged his fellow villagers' jokes at his expense with his former easygoing toleration.

Considerable interest among the farmers was roused by the settling of Juhan Känd on Kurvest's farm. Juhan Känd turned out to be a jolly, talkative and very genial man of middle age. Two hired trucks loaded to the top brought down his belongings. Curious eyes managed to catch sight of well-filled bags of grain, packing cases and town furniture under the tarpaulin covering.

Juhan himself came down on a rickety red tractor, which he housed in the large shed beside a threshing machine, a drill and a reaper.

Together with Juhan there arrived his young wife with a fluffy fox collar, and an elderly woman, probably her mother, with lips set in an expression of distaste. The wife carefully carried into the house a tiny dog with round, malignant eyes bulging like buttons, and reappeared no more in the yard where her husband, the truck drivers and a flurried Saamu were busy around the cases.

"Oho!" Maasalu said significantly to his friends as they stood watching Känd's trucks driving past. "It's clear the new settler gentleman's got tons of stuff."

Many other farmers of the district said "oho" too. Some of them, it appeared, had met him at the local fairs, where Känd occasionally managed to strike rather successful deals. Juhan Känd had never had any land of his own. He used to prefer to rent it from farmers in the districts bordering on Koordi who were close to ruin. It was said that he rented land very profitably: after exhausting the soil, taking from it in a couple of years all it could produce and giving it nothing in return, he willingly parted with it.

Känd knew a little about everything. He could drive a tractor, and take apart and put together an electric motor, although not

always successfully; he was a walking information bureau who knew what could be bought of whom in the county, with or without additional payment; he gave advice and in general was considered a man of affairs.

And now a tractor had turned up in Känd's possession, put together no one knew how and out of what, especially for the new machine cooperative. He had built it up out of a dilapidated engineless frame which a driver he knew had delivered to him for a couple of litres of home-brewed vodka. The indefatigable Känd had scoured the county for the engine, bearings, magneto and other parts; for some he had traded "soapstone" which turned out to be godawful rubbish, and others he simply "took on a long-term loan," as the farmers put it.

The rickety tractor, painted a bright red by Känd, looked quite showy: it roared deafeningly as it rolled along and belched blue smoke—in a word, it produced an impression.

This was the tractor Juhan Känd was leasing—was making a gift of, you might say—to the machine cooperative that was being organized.

After delivering his belongings to the house Juhan Känd did not tarry there, but betook

himself to the more populous parts of the village. He visited all the near neighbours—Koor, Vao, Tatrik and Meisterson, all except Paul Runge, perhaps because the path leading there was snowed up. People saw him at the village Soviet, at the executive committee of the district Soviet and the local cooperative store. His loud, slightly husky and cheery voice could be heard everywhere. One man he promised the loan of his drill, with another he clinked mugs of beer.

Sociable fellow though he showed himself to be, the farmers were not so much interested in Känd's arrival in Koordi as they were in that of his rickety tractor. There had never been a tractor in Koordi before. Oh, that was a big thing! Känd intended working "under the machine cooperative," as he told everybody.

The new cooperative was a matter of vital interest to many, and the inaugural meeting held in the middle of February was attended by farmers from the most distant holdings.

Juhan Känd, as a man familiar with the handling of tractors, was elected chairman of the cooperative. No less important, in the eyes of many farmers, was the fact that Känd, in joining the cooperative, was leasing his tractor

to it, making a gift of it, so to speak. And so it was kind of awkward not to show Känd preference.

That was the opinion expressed at the meeting by Mihkel Koor.

Arguments and discussions arose when it came to electing the auditing commission. About a dozen candidates were proposed, among them, as a matter of course, Johannes Vao.

Unexpectedly for all a man got up to speak who was a stranger to most of the old farmers of the district, a man in a shabby greatcoat with a heavy grim face from which a pair of steady grey-blue eyes looked out with a hard unyielding expression.

He not altogether politely elbowed his way closer to the presidium table past the old, respected farmers of Koordi. Johannes Vao, sitting in the front, scowled when he caught sight of his face.

The man made a very brief speech which rang out sharp and clear—with the same sharpness and clarity that marked the lines of his manly face.

"In the first place," he said, "this should be treated as an undertaking of the Soviet power. We have had machine cooperatives in

the district before this, but what were they? They were run by kulaks. But this is a Soviet cooperative. What should be its first aim? First of all to help not prosperous farmers like Koor or even middle farmers like Johannes Vao who can manage their ploughing without it, but former pops and farm labourers and the new settlers who haven't any farm machines of their own. That means that representatives of the poor peasants should guide and control the work of the cooperative. And so I propose electing Maasalu to the auditing commission. And that's that!"

He returned to his seat amid a dead silence, feeling the intent looks being cast at him. Among these, the look that Mihkel Koor gave him could hardly be called a friendly one.

He didn't care a tinker's damn for those scowling looks! The fields of Crane farm needed a tractor. That and Aino's constant anxious question—"Who's going to help us, Paul?" was what had impelled him, usually so taciturn, to speak.

Muuli, the Party organizer, who sat at the presidium table, smiled at him approvingly.

"Why talk like that? Doesn't the matter affect all the farmers in Koordi alike? They're all going to carry out the plan of State de-

liveries. And the cooperative is needed by Koor and Meisterson, and by him, Tatrik, and Maasalu, and everybody. . . ."

These good-natured conciliatory words were uttered by the representative of the village Soviet, Tatrik, who liked all decisions to be made quietly and peaceably, without quibbling—otherwise, how could you keep order?

The effect of his conciliatory speech was all but spoilt by Kristjan Taaksalu.

"Look you, that lad Runge is quite right!" he trumpeted. "Mihkel Koor needs a tractor, too, but we need it more."

There was a bit of an uproar and hubbub. . . . Opinions differed, but when the votes were counted Johannes Vao was found to have received more than Kaarel Maasalu. Vao, after all, was an old-timer in Koordi, while that chap from Jaagu farm was still a dark horse.

Paul sat scowling—apparently it wasn't so easy to dislodge his father-in-law at one fell stroke. His roots went deep. . . .

The new times had come into home life in Koordi too. For how else, thought the farmers, could you explain the deep gulf of discord that had formed between Crane farm and Vao's farm? Johannes now could not stand the

mere mention of Paul's and Aino's names, and the latter, in their turn, made no move either toward submission or reconciliation.

Could such a thing have happened in the old days? Not likely. The new son-in-law would have come together with Aino to beg forgiveness. Standing in the kitchen, they would have listened to what Johannes had to say to them. And Paul, you can rest assured, would have worked the first spring on Johannes' fields from a sense of kindred duty and respect. For those who possess no riches find humility the best policy.

And then, who knows but that Johannes, who liked to have respect shown him, might have forgiven the daughter whom he had driven out of his house. Out of a sense of paternal pride—so that people should not laugh at the newlyweds' wretched life—he might have made Paul a gift of a couple of sheep and a cow. And probably lent him a plough or a harrow when he needed it. After all, his heart was not made of stone.

But what had happened now was quite incomprehensible. Two people, beggars you might say, had taken it into their heads to build up a life at Crane farm by their own efforts.

In Johannes' opinion this was as impossible as attempting to drain the Ussi soo,* which robbed the district of two hundred hectares of land. True, some foolhardy fellows had once tried, but nothing came of it—just a waste of labour—Snake Swamp had the laugh on them.

It looked as though the newlyweds didn't care a rap whether he forgave them or not, and the way they bore themselves was, in Johannes' opinion, a defiant challenge to him before everyone in the village.

"Pride never made anyone rich," Johannes growled to his wife Liina. "You'll see. . . ."

* Snake Swamp.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As to what was going on at Crane farm the villagers of Koordi knew very little. The farm itself stood out of the way and the smoke from its chimney could not be seen from the highroad. Paul Runge rarely showed himself in public places, unlike that ubiquitous Juhan Känd, the new master of Kurvest farmstead. Yet not a family in the village was making such intense preparations for the coming of spring as Paul and Aino were at Crane farm.

In the cow house there now stood the skewbald cow Minny, which had once belonged to Kurvest. During the first few days Aino kept running to the cow house almost every minute. She scrubbed and brushed the cow till she shone, she washed the udder with warm water and greased it. A suckling, bought from Meisterson on Paul's army savings, lay grunting in a corner. And finally, behind a partition of fir poles, stood Antu himself, the twenty-year-old gelding!

Paul had had to put up a fight for Antu. Juhan Känd wanted to get the horse for him-

self—he didn't have a horse either, if it came to that. The matter was brought before Janson. Paul, trying hard to curb his feelings, asked the chairman what a man could do without a horse when there wasn't a billet of wood on the farm and even water had to be brought up in a barrel from half a mile away. And how was he to cart up the timber for the new house, and what was he going to do the ploughing on?

He looked Janson steadily in the eye, and the latter took his side.

"I can't understand you," Janson said to Känd, and there was a note of vexation in his voice. "Arguing over this twenty-year-old crock—people will laugh at you. D'you mean to say you can't afford to buy a new one?"

Juhan gave in. Really, it wasn't worth kicking up a row over that old crock.

And so Antu, together with Kurvest's old cart, was installed at Crane farm. There was something to cart water on now and even faggots from the woods. Paul skilfully repaired the old sledge.

He made a trip to town and looked up the old carpenter Johannes Uustalu. Together they visited the County Party Committee, the cooperative and the sawmill. Uustalu had friends

everywhere, and men everywhere took off their hats to the old man in the shabby old-fashioned coat.

Two days later a truck delivered them both at Koordi and set them down at the fork in the road—there was no means of approach to the farm by car. They unloaded a dozen planks, sheets of cardboard, a barrel of cement, a case of glass and a new table of fresh white wood. Paul went for Antu and carted it all down to the farm.

The great builder, to Aino's surprise, proved to be a grey little old man with a vivacious face and humorous eyes. He shook hands politely with Aino and surveyed her with frank admiration.

Aino bustled about the stove in a nervous flutter. Good God, what could she give them to eat? She had nothing but potatoes and a piece of salted pork in the pot. But the little old fellow rose nobly to the occasion.

"Don't you bother, Paul and I have brought one or two things along with us," he said, throwing her a merry, friendly wink.

Indeed, the knapsack of this wonderful Santa Claus proved to contain cold meat and sour-sweet bread and butter. They dined off the new table, which smelled freshly of fir gum.

"Well, now to get down to work," Uustalu said with decision, and swiftly slipped on a pair of well-worn blue overalls. Paul also changed into an old suit.

For two days the house resounded to the knocking of axes and hammers, the rasping of saws and the scraping of Uustalu's plane, and Aino kindled the stove with fresh shavings. How much the house changed in two days, while that cheerful old man was in command! Sometimes he grumbled at Paul, cocked his eye at a rough piece of board, then fell to exorcising it with plane and chisel until it assumed the shape of a window frame or a handsome kitchen shelf for Aino. The old man walked up and down, his eye screwed in annoyance, while Aino watched him fascinated.

The floor no longer creaked—they had relaid it and fitted in new boards. The walls with the tow sticking out of them and the sooty ceiling were covered with light-brown cardboard and neat slats were nailed down at the seams. The room grew bright and cheerful. The broken windows were fitted with new panes.

When everything was finished and the remaining materials were carried into the shed, Uustalu took off his overalls and got ready to

leave. Surveying the results of his handiwork, he said very gravely, without a smile:

"I'd like to begin life anew in this house myself. . . ."

Aino, on a sudden impulse, kissed the grey little tuft on his temple.

Paul drove Uustalu down to the highroad on Antu. He wrung his hand warmly at parting and muttered:

"Thanks, old man—for everything. . . ."

"Nonsense," growled Uustalu. "People do you a good turn, and you them—yes. . . . My turn'll come too, don't forget!"

A passing motorist gave him a lift and he rode off.

"What a wonderful old dear!" Aino cried delightedly when Paul had stabled Antu and come into the room. "Brought happiness and went away."

"I told you," Paul answered with a feeling of pride. "He's been that way all his life—builds one house then starts on another."

The work at Crane farm did not diminish with the departure of Uustalu. Neither Paul, nor Aino, nor Antu knew what it was to rest. Early in the morning, before it was light, Paul would harness the old gelding and ride down to the stream for water, while Aino fed

the pig and the cow, milked the cow and prepared breakfast. After breakfast Paul would ride out ten kilometres to the woods where the forestry authorities, upon the presentation of the district executive committee, had apportioned a plot of standing timber for new housing purposes. The trees had to be felled now, while it was winter, as there would be no time for it in a few months. He had volunteered to help Peeter Tatrik fulfill his State timber deliveries, for which Tatrik in turn had promised to help him.

Paul would come home after dark, tired, and dump the cartload of faggots in the yard. He washed his hands, black and sticky with tree gum, as best he could, sat down at the table in the kitchen and hungrily attacked the hot potatoes seasoned with flour gravy. Their fare was at present rather poor. The milk Minny gave Paul conveyed twice a week to the dairy and sold the butter to the cooperative society. Every ruble in the new household was precious and was spent only after careful consideration.

Antu, too, was placed on short rations. Morning and evening Paul gave him a tiny measure of oats. There was only one sack of oats and it had to be husbanded till the spring.

Aino anxiously watched the hay in the shed dwindling from day to day—it had been given them by the district, as had the oats and the seed—but Janson had warned them that that was all they would get. Would it be enough? "What if it doesn't last?" Aino thought anxiously. Antu would be no good as a worker then—look how his ribs stuck out even now. And Minny, too, had to be fed well—she would be calving in two months' time.

So there you were.... And sitting in the evening in the light of the oil lamp, they racked their brains.

Lighting a cigarette after his frugal supper and looking worriedly at Aino, Paul said:

"Everything's all right, but what about fertilizer? The fields haven't been manured for five years. There isn't any more mineral fertilizer in the district. As for the manure from our animals, it'll just about be enough for the vegetable garden."

"I have ashes for the garden," Aino said briskly.

She had knocked together a wooden box in which she collected ashes.

"It won't be enough just the same," Paul said, shaking his head. "But what about the fields?"

To this Aino could answer nothing.

"If I could get through with the work in the woods by the end of February," Paul mused, "maybe then I could at least bring up some turf from the swamp."

Then he took a pencil and began sketching a plan of the new cattle shed and house and calculating how much stone he would need for the foundation, but soon began to nod drowsily.

"Bedtime!" Aino would say peremptorily.

Often at night, too, talk about the new house would go on endlessly at the quiet farmstead.

"We shouldn't think about anything else until we've finished with the building," Paul said. "There mustn't be anything to distract us. . . ."

"The beginning's hard," Aino said soberly, "but when you've got land, a cow and a horse and a pig, it's much easier."

She went on to say that all this held out good hopes, for which she, Aino, was prepared to say thank you to the Soviet Government before the whole district. They ought to cultivate as much land as they could, sow all the wheat and oats they could and plant potatoes, not forgetting mangel-wurzel. Then they would

have feed for Minny and Antu. They'd fatten up the pig on mangel, too, and not slaughter it until it weighed twelve poods. Half of it they could salt and the other half sell and buy two suckling pigs on the proceeds. One of them they would keep for breeding and then next year would have their own litter. Minny was going to have a calf. If the crop turned out well they would buy another cow. And then things would be fine....

Her flight of fancy stopping short at the luxuriant garden around the new house, Aino lapsed into silence, as though her thoughts had formed a closed circle, and then asked anxiously:

"Still, who's going to help us? We have no plough!"

"The tractor will do the ploughing," Paul said sleepily. "That red tractor of Känd's—it's in the machine cooperative now."

And so the days of the new settlers on Crane farm passed in strenuous work. And though the days grew steadily longer, they were all too short for them.

After seeing Paul off to the woods, Aino set about her domestic tasks. If snow had fallen overnight she shovelled the yard clean, chopped up the firewood her husband had

brought in and stacked it in front of the shed, chopped up straw to feed the cow, cleaned and tidied the house, stopped up the mortises in the cattle shed with tow, nailed down some latchets, and knocked together a little larder out of boards in the storm passageway.

She moved about swiftly and lightly, humming to herself all the time:

> Oh, for some planks, for a saw, that would make
> Quickly a boat to pass over the lake.
> But—if you're longing your sweetheart to woo—
> Surely you'll know how to build a canoe!

Oh, she was prepared to work hard for her happiness! Could you call that work she was now doing? She only regretted she couldn't fell the logs for their future house together with her husband in the woods. But then who would tend the cow and the pig?

"Wait till spring comes, that's when there'll be plenty of work for you," Paul promised.

And she waited eagerly for the spring. You just let her sow, she would show you how to reap!

Hot, healthy peasant blood coursed in Aino's veins, shone through the rosy skin of her broad, round face, and sparkled with the sheer joy of living in her blue eyes. She could

lift a five-pood sack from the ground onto a cart. She danced once for a wager at a village party and kept it up for over an hour until the musicians gave in. Nothing was too hard for her. Only the attainment of wealth seemed to her a difficult and impossible task. She was a peasant and knew only too well what it meant to start life without having a plough or a harrow. People in Koordi used to spend a lifetime getting them. But Paul had faith, and that sustained her own belief in the efficacy of the new forces.

Work in the forest was making progress. Peeter Tatrik's lumbering norm had been fulfilled, and trees were now falling for Paul Runge's new house.

Paul's broad back was bent over the saw, and to Tatrik it spoke of an inflexible determination to hang on to that tree until its trunk fell crashing to the ground.

"I'm sorry I ever started with you," Tatrik growled good-naturedly, mopping his brow and throwing away his unfinished cigarette. "At this rate we'll soon be good for nothing."

Paul hacked the branches off a felled pine. He slashed at them with such ferocity that one might think these gnarled boughs barred the way to his new house. The sharp axe

hacked off branches the thickness of a man's arm at a single stroke..

Paul threw himself into his job without a thought for anything except what he had in hand, like a horse plodding down the furrow. Now everything depended only upon him, upon his work. Everything was perfectly clear. There, in Koordi, was land—his land. Here was timber. It had to be felled in order to build the new house. He had to hurry, because spring was coming. And he needed time to cart down at least a little turf from the swamp to the fields that hadn't been manured for years. The snow was already beginning to melt under the March sun, was becoming porous and spongy. The snowdrifts on the sunny fringe of the woods were vanishing like soap suds.

Yes, he had to hurry.

CHAPTER NINE

Though Paul Runge worked against time to cart turf from the swamp to the fields, spring nevertheless forestalled him. It came one April night in a dense humid mist alive with muffled noises and movement—as though vast flocks of birds were flying past high overhead. The commotion was that of the trees shaking off the spring drops and of invisible streams gurgling in their eternal striving to reach the sea. The farmyard blackened. The sledge, which Paul had left the evening before on a tiny strip of brittle ice outside the shed, by morning had settled into the slush, and he had a hard time dragging it into the shed. Going down to the swamp was out of the question.

For the first time in three months Antu was not harnessed into the shafts. Paul gave him a good cleaning down. He looked him over carefully and shook his head.

"Now, now, old boy, hold out, we won't last the spring at this rate," he muttered. "Need a rest."

And he gave Antu a full portion of hay and oats.

This was the first day in recent months that Paul found himself with nothing to do. He was not used to it, and it irked him somewhat. Aino more than once that day jestingly complained that he was in her way and had better lie down and take a rest.

He could not rest, however. He wandered about the house and the yard a prey to disturbing thoughts—he felt all the time that he had forgotten to do something, had overlooked something important. But what? Antu and the cow Minny were peacefully chewing the last remnants of hay in the cattle shed, the two-weeks' old fawn-coloured calf—Aino's pet—was frisking about in the tiny crib, and the pig was grunting. No, everything here was in order.

He went into the shed and examined the cart—an old wreck, but it would still give service: he had repaired it in his spare time and changed one of the wheels. He threw a pleased look into the corner where there stood two barrels of cement, a case of glass and an iron slab for the cooking range—all for the future house. No, say what you like, these three months had not been wasted. Hardly anyone

could have managed more than he had done at Crane farm during that time.

But the disquieting feeling did not leave him. What could it mean? Paul sat down on a rock outside the shed and sat for a long time wrapped in thought, gazing out toward the forest veiled in a blue mist. For some inexplicable reason he found himself recalling a similar misty slushy day in Kurland a year back, when he and three other scouts were making their way behind the enemy's lines. They had parted company in the underbrush facing a clearing. They had to cross the clearing and meet again in the woods. The forest had loomed dimly blue and mysterious, as it did now. His friends had been swallowed up in the mist. He had experienced for a moment a keen sense of being lost and alone in the world, and a desire to see his three companions, feel their presence and learn what had happened to them.

So now did he suddenly remember that he had not seen the friendly company of Jaagu farm all these months. How were they getting on? And then there was the Party organizer Muuli, the talk with whom, he felt, had left many things unsaid. Perhaps Muuli had already forgotten him? And, in general, did the

district authorities remember that he existed, did they see him puttering about on Crane farm? After all, Janson had two hundred farms, as he said, and his, Runge's farm, was probably the least important of them.

"Nonsense," he said to himself firmly, with a toss of the head. "Muuli won't come and put a door on your shed. And you still haven't got one. . . ."

And he set to work making a door for the shed out of the pieces of board left over from the house repairs.

The next day the sun came out. The big shallow puddles in the yard shone a dazzling blue and acquired a deceptive depth. White clouds floated across them. Paul troubled these peaceful little lakes by throwing stepping stones into them so that Aino should not wet her feet when running to the cattle house.

"It's like running across the sky," Aino said delightedly.

"Never mind, we'll drain that sky by next year," Paul muttered. "The yard needs levelling down and I'll have to dig a ditch to the vegetable garden."

That day he made a cage out of thin poles, such as the farmers use for carting hay—it

would come in useful. He even found time to build a little house for the starlings, which he nailed to the old birch tree in front of the house.

Antu received a full ration of oats on the second day of rest too.

In the evening Peeter Tatrik, in muddy rubber boots, dropped in.

"Almost impossible to get to you," he complained. "Sitting in the middle of the flood like Noah in his Ark."

He did not tell Paul that had his wishes been consulted he perhaps would not have come at all, but, as representative of the village Soviet, he was obliged to hand in reports about the farmers' preparedness for the spring sowing campaign, and Janson had scolded him again for being behind in his duties. And then the Party organizer Muuli had looked at him very hard that day, as if trying to recollect something, and then suddenly asked him how that new settler Runge on the Kurvest fields was getting on. He had been rather at a loss what to reply.

Paul invited the guest into the house, but on the way the latter suddenly dived through the half-open door of the cattle house where he tarried quite a while chatting with Aino

and examining the animals. He threw a glance too at the half-open door of the shed.

Paul merely chuckled to himself. He had a suspicion that in showing his farm to garrulous Tatrik he was showing it to the whole village.

They went inside.

"I haven't seen a human face here for a week," Paul said gaily. "Well, let's hear the news."

Tatrik did not have to be asked a second time. As for himself, everything was in order—the winter crop didn't look at all bad, he only hoped the night frosts wouldn't spoil it. Things were busy again at the village Soviet and the district executive committee, the way they always were during big campaigns. The telephone rang all day, the county authorities inquiring how sowing preparations were getting on, and whether they would have enough seed. Janson reported that they would manage with the grains but not with clover and timothy. The county authorities said they would have to do the best they could with what they had on the spot. Well, what else? Yes, an unpleasant bit of news—some bandits had robbed a farm in the neighbouring village, had made away with a whole cartload of stuff

on the farmer's own horse. They had tied and gagged the farmer and threatened to kill him.

"They been caught?" Paul asked.

"Easier said than done," Tatrik answered with a shrug. "They took to the woods. They were armed—German arms," he added significantly.

"H'm. . . ." Paul looked closely at Tatrik. "Did the farmer recognize any of 'em?"

"Who knows, perhaps he did," Tatrik answered evasively, glancing at Aino and veiling his small, faded blue eyes under his heavy, weather-beaten eyelids. "Sometimes it's better not to. The farm stands in an out-of-the-way spot. The district authorities are far away but the forest is near," he muttered.

Paul could get nothing more out of him. Peeter maintained a dogged silence and wrapped himself in the malodorous smoke of home-grown tobacco.

The guest looked around him with frank curiosity, twisting his head on its wiry neck from side to side. No, you couldn't say they were well off here yet, but—there was something about the place which old Peeter with the experienced eye of a farmer could not fail to notice. The table, the stools, the bed—

though rudely fashioned, were new and strong, obviously made by the master's own hands. Tatrik drew that inference from something resembling a carpenter's bench that stood by the window, on which lay a plane with curly shavings still in it. Some kind of seeds lay on a moist rag in a plate on the table—evidently undergoing a test for germination. Tatrik stole a glance at a bag of seed onions hanging on the wall in a dry place. These people apparently were seed-minded. Everything around spoke of their energetic intentions. Even the walls and ceiling, skilfully covered with light cardboard, seemed to have inexorably and determinedly enlarged this once cramped and smoke-ridden hole.

"When I married Mari—" Tatrik suddenly began in a reminiscent tone. "Yes, when I married my Mari I got the Mäe farm as dowry. Four hectares of land and a little cot—that was all the farm there was. There was also a calf and a sheep. One stool spoke to another across the room—just like here. Yes. . . ."

Tatrik looked at Paul, then looked at Aino's smiling face and wriggled the gnarled fingers of his big hands, as though struggling to express feelings that he couldn't understand himself.

"Now we have a couple of cows and a horse and five sheep," he mumbled. "And pigs too. But I can't eat pork now—doesn't agree with me. Doctor Tõnisberg said I have an ulcer of the stomach from hard work. Can't get away from it. I toiled and moiled for thirty years so's Mari could put a ham on the table on weekdays as well as Sundays."

"Well, Aino and I are going to have it soon," Paul said gaily and winked at Aino. "You can believe it. . . ."

"I'm beginning to," Tatrik nodded. "Well, what should I say about you in the district Soviet? Are you going to sow? Have you enough seed?"

"Do they think up there that we've eaten the seed?" Aino, offended, gave voice from the stove.

"We'll sow all we got by way of loan. All four hectares of tillage, or my name's not Paul Runge," Paul said.

"A man's answer," Peeter approved. "But you have no clover seed, have you?"

"That I haven't," Paul said. "No clover or timothy grass."

"I'll have some left over. Clover is fetching a good price these days," Tatrik said. "You won't buy it though, will you?"

"I haven't got the money for it," Paul answered glumly. "You'll have to sell it to someone else, Peeter."

"When I married Mari," Tatrik muttered again after a pause, "we didn't have enough rye to sow—just one bag, seven poods in it—and no one lent me any, not even Kukk the shopkeeper. We thought we were done for. So I went to old Kurvest, Mart's father, and said: 'Lend me some, or give it to me and I'll work it off.' He had it in for me—he had counted on Mäe farm himself, had wanted to buy it, but I upset his plans by marrying Mari. He came out into the yard, gave me a proud look and said: 'A bag of rye to me is just for feeding the sparrows.... I don't lend it in single bags, but I'll give you one for nothing if I have a mind to. If you carry it from my barn to your farm without taking it off your back, it's yours.' And he shouted to the farm hand: 'Give him a bag!' I was pretty strong in those days so I shouldered the bag and started off. The first mile wasn't so bad, but by the time I got through the second I was all in a sweat, my legs were all wobbly and red circles were swimming before my eyes. Kurvest and his farm hand were following behind in a cart. I dropped down just within half a

mile of home. The farm hand dumped the bag into the cart and rode back together with Kurvest."

"He was fond of a joke, I've heard say," Paul growled. "Pity you didn't make it."

"I was sorry myself I didn't. I'd like to have seen his mug then," said Tatrik. "My strength gave out. But I never forgot it. It came back to me again today, and I thought to myself, now why shouldn't I lend you some clover seed."

Paul looked at him in astonishment, but Tatrik's face wore its habitual expression of impassive good humour. You would think, devil take it, the man was offering an old rake instead of clover seed which was now worth its weight in gold. And so Paul was at a loss for words, and merely exchanged glances with Aino, who was fairly beaming.

"So come down tomorrow," Tatrik drawled.

"I'll—er—come," Paul said, clearing his throat. "This will help me a lot, Peeter, I must say—a damned lot. . . ."

Tatrik sat on a little longer, then took his leave. Shaking hands with Paul out in the yard, Peeter threw a glance at the woods and the deserted fields and muttered in an undertone:

"Ought to get yourself a dog.... It's jollier. You know, they say the farmer who was robbed recognized one of the bandits. Kurvest's son Robert, so they say. I don't know, maybe it's only gossip...."

"Oh," Paul frowned. "Revisiting his native parts, eh?"

Tatrik merely shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

The news concerning Kurvest's elder son did not make much of an impression on Paul on that bright spring day. He dismissed the matter from his mind as something very remote and needless, and it excited no apprehensions.

He went back into the house with a glad smile, and thrusting his hands into his pockets—always a sign that he was in a good humour—he said to his wife with animation:

"See that? Tatrik, eh?"

"What?" Aino asked.

"See the way he inspected everything? As if to say, 'Let's see whether these folks at Crane farm are worth considering.' We've found another friend today. Promised us seed.... This is a good day. Only I've been trying to figure out all the time whom we have

to thank for this. Do you know? You just think it over, it's worth it."

Paul, whistling to himself, set to work with the plane and kept at it all day. His cheerful mood did not desert him.

At bedtime Aino asked him:

"Whom do we have to thank for Tatrik's visit?"

He laughed and pinched her cheek, saying with a tenderness that was surprising in that awkward and reticent man:

"Silly—you, of course. He saw what a fine wife I have and realized which direction the spring winds are blowing."

Yes, the spring winds blew steadily, and the April sun shone incessantly. The puddles in the yard and on the fields began to dry up. Willows, covered with chicken fluff, emerged on the fringe of the woods, as though they had just stepped out of it. The succulent bark on their supple twigs, grey in the winter, was now dark and glossy, filling with sap. The brow of the distant hill, which had looked monotonously grey during the early days of spring, was now gradually changing colour. The green strips of Johannes Vao's and Peeter Tatrik's winter crops, growing brighter day by day, stood out distinctly on the hillside.

Only the perennial fallow around Crane farm was the same unvaried straw-grey tone.

Paul grew more anxious from day to day. The time for tilling was drawing near. He went to see Juhan Känd, the chairman of the machine cooperative, and found him in the Kurvest farmyard puttering around the red tractor, which had been moved out of the shed.

He greeted the master of Crane farm affably, wrung his hand, offered him a cigarette and dispelled any doubts he may have had about the tractor's readiness.

"Like clockwork," he said emphatically. "You needn't worry, once we've signed a contract. We're going to work on strict schedule. Your turn comes after Rosalia Rist, and her turn's first—she hasn't got a horse at all. First her, and then you."

The last words were drowned in the sudden roar of the tractor engine which began belching blue fumes and quivered like a living thing.

This was more eloquent than any words, and Paul went back reassured and cheered. His mind was so engrossed with thoughts of the tractor that he had even forgotten to have a proper chat with Saamu, whom he met out-

side the cattle shed carrying buckets. Saamu had not looked very cheerful.

The next morning the lively racket of the tractor was carried to Crane farm, and the sounds did not cease all day.

"But that's at the Kurvest farm, not at Rosalia Rist's!" Aino said wonderingly.

"What of it, I suppose he's trying it out. His fields, besides, are higher up and drier. . . ." Paul explained it to himself as he listened intently to the sounds, then added not without irritation:

"Besides, he's also considered a new settler."

Another day went by. A pair of sleek horses climbed slowly to the brow of the hill, visible from Crane farm, and went leisurely down the margin of land, clearly outlined against the blue sky.

"That's father harrowing," Aino said, scanning the distance with narrowed eyes. "See how he steps out. As though he bore a blessing in his hands."

Paul too, straining his eyes, could now make out Johannes Vao, who strode behind the horses with a slow and stately tread, holding the reins in his outstretched hands. Johannes was, in fact, stepping out with an air

of being conscious of the whole district watching the master of Vao farmstead harrowing his field.

That day the tractor could be heard clattering somewhere behind the woods, from the direction of Koor's fields which bordered upon Roosi Rist's new allotment. Paul could stand it no longer.

"I'm—I'll soon be back," he said to Aino.

With long strides he crossed the field toward the woods, from where the pulsations of the unflagging metallic heart could be heard, now muffled by the distance, now loud, as if close at hand.

He found Roosi Rist standing by a freshly ploughed furrow. She had brought some milk in a jug for the tractor driver, had brought it over an hour ago, and the milk had been drunk, but she still stood by the balk, unable to tear her eyes away from the turned-up furrows. Her huge, almost masculine hands hung down her sides as she stared fascinated at the smoothly running tractor on which, tense-faced, sat the young eighteen-year-old tractor driver—some relative of Känd's, so rumour said. The black ploughed strip grew wider and wider. Her field! A field on which, for the first time in her life, wheat would

rear its golden head for Roosi Rist—only for her. It was so beautiful, almost too good to be true.

"Hullo, Roosi," said Paul.

She did not stir. He repeated it in a louder voice.

She turned, and Paul saw that her face was wet with copious womanish tears.

"Hullo, Runge," she said, looking at him with shining eyes. "That's being tilled to wheat. . . ."

They said not a word more to each other, though they stood for quite a time side by side, watching the plough throwing up ever new slices of the earth that was preparing to open up to them its great bounties.

There was a lot of talk that evening at Crane farm about the tractor that was expected the next morning. So Känd had promised. Paul set aside cans of gasoline. Aino worried what to make for next day's dinner. It was decided to sacrifice the last piece of salt pork, which Aino had been saving up for a gala occasion.

CHAPTER TEN

The tractor did not come in the morning. After waiting in vain for it till midday, Paul clapped his cap on his head without saying a word and strode off to the Kurvest farm.

Many hours had elapsed and long shadows had fallen across the fields before Paul at last came back and passed into the house without a glance at his wife, who was standing in the doorway.

Aino, seized by a sudden foreboding, stood with her hands clasped to her breast, watching her husband in mute suspense. He sat hunched on a stool with his cap on, staring gloomily at the floor.

"The tractor's broken down," he said wearily. "Get that? Bearings overheated and some other trouble. . . ."

Aino's heart contracted at the sight of his haggard face—she had not noticed before how thin he had become. His broad face was peaked and the hair had grown long on his neck. In that old cap pulled down over his jutting forehead he no longer resembled the trim soldierly figure he had so recently been,

but looked just an ordinary poor, careworn farmer. He had a seedy, faded sort of appearance, like his old army shirt which had been through the wash so many times.

"He's a liar!" Aino cried in a sudden burst of anger. "I don't believe it broke down!"

"He showed me some parts or other," Paul said dully with a shrug. "How do I know.... I also think he's lying, so does Maasalu. But what's the use? How can you prove it?"

In the same toneless voice he told her about his doings that day. He had gone up to the district Soviet too. Janson swore at Känd, and Känd swore at the bearings. But what good did it do? It would take two weeks to repair the tractor.

Aino made determinedly for the door.

"Where are you going?" Paul stopped her. "Wait—"

"You haven't been able to do it, so I'm going to act now," Aino said challengingly. "I'll ask father. If he refuses he's no father."

"No you won't," Paul said, slowly squaring his shoulders. "That's just what Johannes is waiting for. They're all expecting us to go to the wall. They're stubborn, but I'm a hundred times more stubborn than they are."

There was such hatred in his voice that Aino yielded without further demur. And though things looked black indeed she suddenly believed in this man's dogged determination. At this point she remembered that he was probably not only tired but hungry as well.

"Don't be angry," she said tenderly. "We shan't make it any better by quarrelling."

She placed on the table an earthenware jug of clotted milk covered with an amber layer of cream. Paul recalled bitterly that it had not been skimmed only because it had been intended for the boy tractor driver, Juhan Känd's relative. They ate in silence, hungrily biting off chunks of bread, both wondering where could they get a plough and harrow. Where could they get another horse? Antu would not be able to draw the plough alone in land which had become almost virgin soil.

They cudgelled their brains both after supper and during the night, only now they voiced their thoughts aloud. The trouble was that now everyone had his hands full. Paul would not even hear of asking Johannes Vao or his son-in-law Koor for help. What about trying the district horse-hire station? But the contracts had been made long ago and the horses were all out in the fields.

"I don't see what else we can do," Paul said the next morning, summing up, as it were, the result of their long reflections. "If I could only get a plough, at least. . . ."

He harnessed Antu and set for district headquarters.

Antu, who had rallied during this period of forced idleness, jogged along at a brisk trot past the fields on which the farmers of Koordi could be seen plodding behind their ploughs and cultivators. Many of them turned to gaze questioningly at the man who in this busy season spared neither his time nor his horse and was bound on some errand that took him away from home.

They stared at Runge in silence and he stared back at them in silence.

He was thinking as he rode along that though there was this sweeping expanse of field all around where a horse, harnessed to the plough, could go on and on to the very blue horizon turning up furrows of the damp spring earth, these peasants instead were going round in the old familiar well-trodden circle from balk to balk. No sooner do the horses fall into their stride than they reached some invisible but insuperable barrier and turned back again. It wasn't a field, it was a crazy

quilt in which the patches of lush winter wheat were not so very numerous. Koor's strips out there were fine, though; their smooth vivid-green shimmer gladdened the eye. Why shouldn't they be fine? Roosi had gone over them three times during the autumn with disk cultivator and harrow, manure alone had been carted out at the rate of fifty cartloads per hectare, and Koor had sown with graded seed. All the other strips were worse; as many as there were of them, and all different, because they had been sown with different kinds of seed, at different times and manured in different degrees. Not that the farmers hadn't done their best or didn't realize the value of graded seed and fertilizer, but it was simply that they didn't have enough of these things or hadn't had the time—every man struggled on alone on his farm, and a man has only one pair of hands, when all is said and done....

There were Peeter Tatrik and Meisterson meeting at their field bound. They had probably been meeting there every spring for the last twenty years, and one of them would always ask the other:

"Well, how's your rye?"

And the other would always answer:

"Worse than yours."

Sometimes it was Tatrik's that was worse, sometimes it was Meisterson's, but rarely did both have good rye, for all that they were considered as skilled farmers as any in the village. Why that was so is too long a story to tell. You could talk about that with an understanding companion till late in the night over a dozen or so mugs of beer and a well-filled tobacco pouch.

To get good shoots and fine weighty ears of grain you had to sow good selected seed. But who on a small farm had the chance to dabble in seed culture? No, that was very difficult and troublesome. The fields of Koordi district were swampy and niggardly for crops. They required a lot of hard work. Now, if you went over your strip five times, first with a plough, then with a disk harrow or cultivator, after that with a spring-tooth harrow, then a spike-tooth harrow, and a leveller on top of it all to smooth down the hard clods, you might, perhaps, hope to get results. And then it wasn't as if you had only one strip—you had a strip under rye, others under wheat, barley and oats. If you had the bad luck to fall ill at an inauspicious time, you were done for—you'd be late, for there was no one else to do the job. Your wife had more

than enough to do looking after the house and animals.

And if you did manage to till the field, it was only half the job. Rye would never grow on the clayey, unproductive fields of Koordi unless you gave them mineral fertilizer and ploughed tens and hundreds of cartloads of manure into the soil. But where could you get manure, when you had very few farm animals? It was the custom in Koordi to keep one cow for every six hectares of land, otherwise you would not be able to provide her with hay. The average farm kept two cows and one horse, while it should keep four cows and two horses on that land. But in that case you'd have to plan things differently. You'd have to plough up all the hummocky crane pastures—the swampy virgin soil, of which there was so much in Koordi, and sow it with grasses, with rich clover and succulent timothy. You couldn't plough and cultivate all that on one horse, oh no. You needed machines for that, tractors! "No sir, every farm has its bounds, like life its limits. . . ." These words always concluded such conversations.

Paul, wrapped in thought, did not notice how he drew level with Mihkel Koor, who was striding behind a harrow drawn by a team of

fine horses. Mihkel behind a harrow—this was indeed a rare sight! The farmers of Koordi had never seen it before. Looking at Koor's lank figure striding pigeon-toed behind the team, one's thoughts, for some reason or other, turned to Roosi, the farm hand, who had set up on her own and was now harrowing her own field.

"Hullo!" Mihkel called out, raising his straw hat with its dented crown. "It's good to see a man who can take things easy. Giving yourself a holiday?"

Paul pretended he had not heard the question.

Great was Mihkel Koor's astonishment when, toward evening, as he was finishing harrowing his field, he saw Paul coming back. His cart was loaded with a plough and a harrow, and a bay horse walked behind it on a halter with Paul by its side keeping off the flies with a switch. Old Antu, calmly swinging his tail, hauled the cart along with a phlegmatic air, as though the delivery of such precious loads to Crane farm were an everyday matter.

Paul drew up Antu with the obvious intention of entering into conversation with Koor. He looked thoughtfully at Koor's sour face and said innocently:

"You know, I've been thinking of it all day—how did you guess this was a holiday for me?"

Mihkel muttered something unintelligible by way of reply, and Paul went on thoughtfully:

"It's always like that—when it's a holiday for one man it isn't for another. You're in a pretty lather today, I see. Not used to it, eh?"

Then he called cheerfully to Antu, and the procession moved on.

Within a kilometre of Crane farm he caught sight of Aino flying down the road toward them, and he muttered:

"Get a move on, old fellow. Looks like someone's expecting us."

Barely suppressing the grin that fought for an outlet in his face, he replied with studied nonchalance to the dozens of excited questions that tumbled from Aino's lips.

"Why, the manager turned out to be a regular fellow...."

Paul, with his habitual aversion to effusive demonstrations, did not go into very great detail. Swinging the switch he had broken off on the way, he steered Antu into the yard in dignified silence. But for his taciturnity he would have told what part Muuli, the Party

organizer, had played in the matter, and how hard it had been to get the bay horse assigned to Crane farm on such short notice. But were all these details so very important? The important thing was that he had got a horse, a plough and a harrow.

Antu was harnessed to the plough alongside the new bay mare. They sniffed each other suspiciously, snorted and stepped into the first furrow still looking askance at each other, but the next day they felt more at home and settled into their stride. They were constantly aware behind their backs of the presence of that restless human being whose will dominated them. He, that man with the reins thrown over his neck and his hands gripping the plough handles, drove them inexorably on and on. He jerked at the reins imperiously when their pace flagged, sometimes he even got angry and growled, and then Antu would swish his tail propitiatingly as though saying: "All right, all right—you don't have to tell me . . ." and throw his weight onto the collar. Though the man could hardly stand on his feet at the end of the long day, he yet found the will to drive on the horses and to force himself to go on.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The four hectares of crops held out good hopes.

The fields of Crane farm grew greener and more luxuriant day by day. On sunny days the old farmhouse looked like a black barge that had found a quiet haven amid a verdant lake after weathering a violent storm. The May breezes rippled the green surface.

In the vegetable garden Aino, in Paul's opinion, had worked wonders. Seedlings were growing in the hotbed. Onions preened their blue plumes and carrot tops were a lacy green, the pumpkins on a sunny little mound spread their thistlelike leaves, and brilliant orange-coloured flowers with a pungent odour, inevitably to be found in all vegetable gardens, opened their eyes. On Aino's insistence, Paul was obliged to fence off this plantation as a protection against the fowls, though there were none yet. But there would be!

The master and mistress of the farm had no time to sit down on the little garden seat that Paul had placed under the birch tree, and

to admire the fruits of their labours. Care stood hard by, as it were, nudging them with a querulous reminder: "Here I am.... And haven't you forgotten about the foundation for the new cattle shed?"

Paul started to dig a ditch for the foundation, but Aino put her foot down and said she would do that herself. He had better cart stones and sand for the foundation and think of a way to bring up the logs from the forest. Wasn't it time to ask those good fellows from Jaagu farm to lend a hand?

The well worried them, too. The spring water was rapidly vanishing. They couldn't do without Semidor here—they would have to call him.

Semidor, however, came himself, as fussy and officious as ever, in his usual flipperty-flopperty jacket with split seams. Under his arm he carried a coil of rope and in his hand a shabby little cardboard suitcase. In less time than it takes to tell he had trotted round the house, the garden and the cattle shed and volunteered his opinion about the place—on the whole a favourable one. He promised to bring Aino some rare seeds and delivered himself of a stream of advice as to where best to build the cattle shed. Paul—himself a car-

penter—heard the advice out with a smile and mumbled vaguely: "Yeah—uhuh. . . ."

It was only when they went up to the well that Semidor became grave and businesslike. He ordered Paul to make at once a ladder and a heavy lid to cover the top of the well.

While Paul was selecting suitable poles, Semidor examined the log-frame and, leaning over into the well, tapped the old roughly-built flagstone walls with a stick. Then he took off his jacket and began helping Paul.

"Look here, Semidor, how did you become a well master?" Paul asked, glancing curiously at his skinny arms tattooed with schooners and anchors.

"Ah, my friend, need will drive a bull into a well, not only a man," Semidor answered readily. "Mother and I had no land on Saaremaa, so what could you do? I was drilling wells at sixteen. Digging 'em here is not half so bad, it's long before you get down to rock—but you try it on Saaremaa. . . . Sometimes you had to drill all ninety-six feet through solid rock. Had to use explosives."

"Dangerous work. . . ."

"Naturally. It's not like digging a ditch. You lay down the charge, then light the fuse, and from that moment every second seems

an hour. The fuse burns two minutes. In that time you've got to climb up to the top, pull the ladder out and close the mouth of the well. Of course, you could burn a longer fuse, make it go five minutes, say—then you needn't hurry—but it costs money and I tried to economize on it."

Paul shook his head.

"Yes, foolish—I admit," Semidor readily acquiesced. "I nearly got killed that way. I lost my footing once as I was climbing up the ladder and fell back into the well. The fuse was nearly burnt out, and it would have been the end of me if I hadn't kept my head—I pulled out my garden knife and cut the fuse off right next to the charge.... My hands began to shake after that, and folks weren't very keen on giving me a job—you're unlucky, they said."

"That's when you went to sea?" Paul asked.

"Yes." Semidor said after a pause. "Then. Mother and I didn't have any land. And I was very sorry for mother. I had only a mother—never knew a father. Just Martin, the son of Maria. I promised her: 'I'll earn enough to buy some land, something you can call your own, even if it's no bigger than your shawl.'

But I didn't have any luck at sea either. I sailed two years on the *Põhjala* as stoker's assistant till we split on a rock in the Gulf of Bothnia, off the coast of Finland. They said afterwards it had all been arranged by the shipowners—it was an unseaworthy old tub, insured very high.... That's when I looked death in the face a second time, but I didn't have a right to die—I hadn't got my land yet. Well, I came back to my island and everyone pointed his finger at me there: 'Semidor's got no luck either on land or sea.' I felt pretty bitter about it. After all, was I to blame? I'd have drilled wells as good as anyone if I didn't have to economize on fuses."

Semidor viciously hammered the pole, driving it into the mortise.

"So did you get any land after all?" Paul asked.

"No, not under that regime.... Maria died. I got a job as road labourer, married, built a little house—no better than your hut here, but it burned down."

"How's that?"

"Damned if I know. Probably from the chimney, in the night. We just managed to escape by the skin of our teeth."

The long ladder was finished, and Paul and

Semidor lowered it carefully into the well. Semidor opened the little suitcase which contained some old drills and several packets of captured German TNT resembling yellow tablets of soap. He took off his hat and tossed it on his jacket, then, upon further reflection, threw off his greasy vest, under which was revealed another one still more greasy and shabby. In this nether waistcoat he went down into the well.

Half an hour passed in waiting.

"Well, how is it?" Paul shouted down now and again.

An indistinct murmur floated up by way of reply.

"Make the fuse longer!" Paul yelled into the dark cavity of the well. "What did you say?"

"Tell it to your grandmother," came up hollowly from below.

Finally, Semidor's bald pate popped up out of the well with startling suddenness. He cleared the well frame with catlike agility and yelled at Paul:

"Pull it up!"

They pulled out the ladder in a trice, pushed the heavy wooden shield over the opening and dashed round the corner of the shed.

There was a hollow rumbling sound and a trembling down below, then something struck the shield with a rattling noise and raised it, like some great fist pushing from underneath.

Below it smelt of stone dust and acrid explosive gases.

Toward evening, after they had removed the rock debris and cleared the bottom, water began to trickle into the well. Slowly but surely its level rose.

Semidor had renovated the well.

Having finished his task, he was in no great hurry to leave. He strutted about, vainly endeavouring to impart an air of magisterial dignity to his jerky figure, offering advice and instruction to the masters of Crane farm how best to plan and build everything. The role of teacher apparently gave sincere pleasure to this old man, who at Jaagu farm was himself held in leading strings and taught the wisdom of life.

According to him, however, things were the other way around. "I told 'em ... I showed 'em . . ." constantly recurred in his speech. One would think that Maasalu and Taaksalu were helpless as babes without him.

"You ought to see the pump I fixed 'em up

for the well!" he cried excitedly. "If you could only see it, lad. . . . The water now runs straight to the cattle shed."

Gone now was his air of grave dignity. He slapped his knee in a most undignified and boyish way and cackled exultantly.

"Mind you, I have nothing to say—they're sensible lads, but they can't get along without old Semidor, like the young cranes can't fly without a leader," he rattled on, winking knowingly and peering closely into his interlocutors' eyes as though fearing they wouldn't believe him.

Paul looked down and smiled, but did not interrupt the old man, not even when Semidor gave a glowing description of how he had secured superphosphate for the tenants of Jaagu farm after a hard fight with the district authorities, apparently forgetting that Paul had been a witness to his ignominy. No, there was something about Semidor that prevented Paul from roughly interrupting him.

When Paul spoke about payment, the old man, trying to recover his dignity, said drily that he had, generally speaking, finished with his old trade, and if he had come to lend a hand it was for his own pleasure, and it was his private concern.

Semidor's words showed that he was offended and Paul hastened to change the subject.

On taking his leave the old man gave Paul and Aino his rough hand, from which time had been unable to erase the anchor tattooed on it, and said patronizingly:

"Get up steam in the boilers. I say that—Semidor. In case of need we'll take you in tow."

At the gate he raised his hat once more with a dignified gesture and nodded his head.

Paul gazed after him thoughtfully. Yes, Semidor was changing beyond recognition. It was just a wonder and nothing else.

Sand was required for the building work. Paul went for it to the sand pits on the edge of the woods next to Roosi Rist's field.

Jolting over the field path in his cart he looked about him with curiosity to see how Roosi's wheat was coming up. He turned his head from side to side with growing amazement.

There wasn't any wheat!

There wasn't any wheat, or any barley, or any rye. Instead of grain there were two narrow strips of oats and potatoes, and

beyond them a large expanse of field sown to vetch.

Oats and vetch, h'm.... Paul shook his head deprecatingly. Whoever heard of a farm being run on such lines? What the dickens was she thinking of?

Ah, here was Roosi herself, in a white kerchief drawn low over the forehead, stepping out with big bare feet behind Koor's horse, earthing up her potatoes. Upon catching sight of Paul she threw him a friendly smile.

He said good-day and asked:

"I say, Roosi, where's your wheat?"

Roosi brushed aside an insistent gadfly. A guilty look crept into her meek eyes.

"No rye, no wheat, no barley," Paul said severely. "What d'you want with all that vetch? You wanted wheat, didn't you?"

Then Paul heard Roosi's rambling story. She had really wanted wheat and barley, like other people had. Koor had promised to lend her the seed, had offered it to her himself, but it turned out at the last moment that he didn't have any. He only had a little oats and then these potatoes. They sowed vetch on the ploughed land so it shouldn't lie fallow. Koor gave the seed for that. He said vetch was greatly needed too.

"I see," Paul said thoughtfully.

He turned away and looked closely at the tall figure of a man who was making sweeping movements with a scythe in the vetch field. He recognized that long lean figure with the straw mushroom on its head.

"Roosi," Paul said gently and sadly, "that's Mihkel Koor, of course, mowing vetch for the cows. I have an idea that it's not for your cow he's doing that. Am I right?"

"But—he sometimes gives me his horse to work on," Roosi muttered.

"Look here, Roosi—" Paul shook his head and moved a pace nearer. "Be careful he doesn't trap you in his web like a fly. Don't you see?"

Roosi said nothing. She looked at Paul from under knitted brows with the same guilty expression.

"You must stand up for yourself," Paul said angrily. "If he's too much for you come and tell me, I'll wring his neck for him, the hungry devil. Will you come?"

"I will," Roosi promised in a low frightened voice and looked apprehensively in Koor's direction. Seeing that he was now leaning on the scythe handle watching them from afar, she turned away quickly.

What had made Paul interfere he could not say himself. The words had escaped him because he was in a towering rage just then.

Mihkel was piling the young fragrant vetch onto the cart.

"Hullo!" cried Paul. "Since when has Mihkel Koor taken to mowing vetch on somebody else's field?"

Koor leisurely wiped the moist gleaming scythe blade with a tuft of grass and silently thrust it into the green shock of vetch.

"Maybe I'm wrong? Maybe you've hired yourself out to Roosi as a farm hand?" Paul asked sarcastically.

Mihkel stepped up to Paul's cart. He was outwardly calm, except for a vein that twitched under one eye in his gaunt face.

"D'you know what, Runge, you mind your own business. Leave well enough alone. Get me?"

They eyed each other for a minute coolly and appraisingly. Then Paul said significantly:

"I don't like it, mister."

"Leave well enough alone," Mihkel repeated.

They held each other with blazing eyes as their carts barely passed on the narrow field path, their front wheels grazing.

Paul Runge sat hunched in his cart. A thick dark vein swelled on his forehead, rage burned within him and his fists clenched hard. He couldn't quite make out himself why he had taken this affair so much to heart—in what way did Roosi's lot concern him? He had flared up most likely because Roosi's case reminded him of the tractor business which had very nearly ruined all his plans. He had no doubt now that Känd had played a dirty trick on him, just as Koor now intended playing one on Roosi. Koor and Känd—they were both birds of a feather!

And what a deep game they had played—you couldn't pick any flaws. The tractor ploughed the land of Roosi Rist, the new settler—everything above board! But who was Roosi Rist? On Roosi's fields there was neither rye nor wheat—only Koor's vetch and some oats and potatoes. In the autumn Koor would reckon up what Roosi owed him for the seed, for the horse, for her tenancy and everything else and would pour her oats into his bins and stow the vetch in his barns. He'd deceive her and cheat her. Meek, downtrodden and mute Roosi, left to the mercies of that hyena, wouldn't stand a dog's chance—she'd give in, of course, be too stunned to show fight. Prob-

ably cry into the pillow and resign herself to her lot, as she had been doing all her life. She would suffer defeat as he, Paul, had done when left to his own resources face to face with that slippery genial wag Känd, who had made a fool of him because Paul had failed to see through him at the time.

"*Kuradi nahk*,"* Paul growled.

The more he thought about it the stronger grew his determination to keep an eye on further developments, to tell Roosi how to act, and, if necessary, make the matter public.

"It's funny," Paul mused wonderingly, "how a fellow can get himself mixed up in an affair despite himself. . . ." He was trying to give all his energies exclusively to the building plans at Crane farm, so that he and Aino could have a cosy life of their own, so that Aino could bake bread in the oven every Saturday, as they did at Vao's and all the other farms, and so they could have salt pork all year round. He wasn't asking for much, God knows. Weren't he and Aino trying to lead a quiet, peaceful life, not seeking a quarrel with anyone, and yet here he was starting a new life in Koordi by making enemies at the very outset.

* An expletive, meaning "devil's hide."

First that conceited and pigheaded Vao, then the slippery Känd.... And now Koor stood in his path. Why was that? It wasn't only because they didn't like his face. It went much deeper than that.

"Too many enemies for one man, what do you say, Antu?" he muttered as he led the horse to the sand pits by the bridle. "Guess we won't manage it singlehanded, eh?"

Antu's only answer was a docile toss of the head. His master's worries affected him but little. He had lived too long to fret and chafe. Gone were the days when he had frisked as a foal about the meadows and glanced askance at the whip with a fiery eye. All he wanted now was to nibble the soft grass, seeing that it was so near. That and a lighter load on the cart if possible....

The cart, however, was heavily loaded. The master had filled the box unstintingly with heavy golden sand. Come what may, the foundation for the new cattle shed at Crane farm had to be built. For the sake of that foundation Paul would spare neither himself nor Antu, and he would wring Känd's own neck if he stood in his path!

CHAPTER TWELVE

One Sunday Paul succeeded in getting a truck from the local lumbering organization and transported logs to Crane farm for the building work. Kristjan Taaksalu, red in the face and grunting with the effort, rolled the huge logs, which he handled with the strength of a bear, while the sturdy and agile Maasalu and Runge lent an active hand. Between them the heavy pine spar logs were rolled slowly up the wooden platform into the truck. The puny Semidor was less helpful, though he made more fuss and noise than anyone else, but even he dexterously used a long pole as a lever. With each log that he sent rolling off the truck into the yard of Grane farm he yelled excitedly:

"There goes another!"

A simple supper was served in the evening, and a bottle was opened. The liquor spread hotly through the men's veins. Their dark sunburnt faces flushed and satisfied, they stretched their legs under the table and fell into a loud and animated conversation none too restrained in choice of expressions.

Aino, listening to their excited voices, was lost in amazement. Looking at Semidor, you would never think it was the same timid and humble Semidor who used to twist his hat in his hand when speaking even with such middle farmers as her father Johannes, let alone the important men of the district. No, this was not the Semidor she knew. You might take him for one of the wealthiest farmers of Koordi judging by the independent air with which he sat back and calculated his future crops, rattling off poods and bags of rye and wheat by the dozen.

Listening to them just now one would think this was a gathering of the district's administrators, so shrewdly and boldly did they discuss its affairs. The way Maasalu railed at Juhan Känd, the chairman of the machine cooperative, calling him a sly fox and a trickster!

He banged the table with his great hairy fist and muttered:

"It's a queer thing—the tractor belongs to the cooperative, but who really owns it? Juhan Känd! But it isn't too late yet to get another man elected, if only we stick together."

He, Kaarel Maasalu, would take good care that that Juhan fellow with his tractor driver

didn't play any more tricks at threshing time. There was a good remedy for that—it was called public control. He'd accompany the tractor and thresher himself, if need be.

And Paul, her Paul....

Gazing out of the window, whence the late summer twilight came flowing into the room, he began talking about how some people in Koordi, on the Kurvest and Koor farms, for instance, had long had radios, and had installed electricity from their own wind motors. But all the rest in the district had always lived without electricity, just kerosene lamps, and there hadn't been anyone to take up the matter, because they weren't equal to the task, they all lived separately, each for himself. Do you mean to say they couldn't fix up light in Koordi if they tackled it all together?

"You bet!" Semidor crowed with delight. He was almost dissolved in the gloom of twilight, and his shrill, excited little tenor sounded all the louder for it. "I know that line of business too, learned it on board ship. Give me a dynamo and I'll fix it up on the old mill in no time."

Then the conversation flowed into the channel it usually took among most of Koordi's farmers at quiet evening hours such as this,

given over to heart-to-heart talks over a bottle of wine or a mug of foaming beer.

Yes, there could be light and everything else a man needed for his comforts if the resources of a single farm were not so limited, if all the land on every farm could be brought under cultivation and richly manured and better provided with livestock. But machines were needed for that, tractors, and a lot of fertilizer.... No, the farmstead didn't allow scope for that. It had reached its limits—reached them long ago. To pass those limits a new step was necessary.

"Collective farming . . ." Maasalu said in a voice that sounded at once a question and an affirmation. "The Party says that's the right step."

All fell silent at these words and grew thoughtful. Paul bit his nails and glanced at his friend with curiosity. This was the first time he had heard the word "Party" from Maasalu's lips. Maasalu and the Party—h'm....

"But that's politics," Paul muttered. "You're flying high—it's not a matter for us to decide. Our job is to till the land. We haven't any collective farms in the Republic yet."

"If there aren't there will be," Maasalu said coolly. "And you think tilling the land isn't

politics? What do you mean it's not for us to decide? If I and Semidor and somebody else make up our minds tomorrow to hand in an application to organize a kolkhoz, there's your kolkhoz—what did you think?"

Maasalu looked round challengingly.

"Tomorrow?" Semidor said with a start. "What about the horse?"

They all burst out laughing at the look of dismay on Semidor's face. They all knew that he had not yet settled up with Maasalu for the horse, of which he was to become full owner—the first time in his life.

"Fat lot you need that old scalawag for your own," Maasalu said teasingly.

"Well—I wanted to get myself a runabout on rubber tires," Semidor said, looking crestfallen. "You know, take a trip up to the district centre or somewhere on business."

They all grinned again.

"The collective farms have their own motorcars," Runge said. "I saw them in Russia. A cut above your runabout."

"There, you see," Maasalu said triumphantly, then added after a pause: "We've got to be prepared for it—that's what life in Koordi is heading toward."

Early morning found Paul at work. He was in a hurry to complete the foundation before Midsummer Day when the hay mowing would start. The work, with Aino's help, was making progress. Aino carried up water for mixing the mortar and handed up the stones. Paul fitted them into place with mallet and trowel, and cemented them down.

It was at this work that Muuli, the Party organizer, found Paul.

Muuli, wheeling his battered old bicycle by the handle bars, appeared all of a sudden on the field balk leading to the farm. The humorous mouth of his lean grave face twitched in amusement as he surveyed Paul, besmeared with lime from head to foot, and he held out his hand in a friendly manner.

Why is it they never saw Runge either at the village Soviet, or the district centre—just as if he weren't a Koordi inhabitant? That's too bad.... Matters were beginning to adjust themselves. A pity there were so few activists, though.... Why didn't he drop in, just for a chat?

"Simply can't find the time," Paul said with a nod toward the half-finished foundation, the

pile of logs and the stones strewn over the ground.

"Yes, I can see, feathering the nest," Muuli agreed, taking a look round. "And making a grand job of it, like Kalevipoeg*...."

He sat down on a log, squinted at the yellowing wheat that grew close to the farm, and said he had dropped in on his way to a meeting of the rural activists in a neighbouring village. He praised Runge's crops and asked in greater detail how the building work was getting on. Hearing of the previous day's *Voskresnik*, he livened up, jotted down something in his notebook and voiced his approval.

"Well, now you've left the first hillocks behind you.... And d'you remember how tough it was in the spring when the tractor broke down? Came running to me, and probably thought that everything was lost, eh? See what it means when people join forces.... That's a power for you! Like a clip of cartridges in the magazine—if the first one misses the mark, the second one will go home."

Muuli's words came very near to what Paul had been experiencing lately, and since Muuli himself had brought up the spring incident

* The son of Kalevi, the hero of the Estonian national epic.

about the tractor, Paul took his cue from him and told him in detail in a tone of indignation about his recent meeting with Roosi and what he thought of Koor.

"Aha, and what did you think?" Muuli asked mockingly. "He'll cheat and take advantage of Roosi's kind and snap them up one at a time. And shall I tell you why? Because men like you, to take an example, are sitting snug in their corners and thinking: what's Roosi got to do with me? It's not my business.... Whose business is it then? I know your kind—all you want at first is a loaf of black bread and a jug of clotted milk, and then when you've got two cows you set your heart on getting a third, and before you know it a new Koor has grown up...."

"That's laying it on thick," Paul said somewhat offended. "If it wasn't my business I wouldn't have spoken about it."

"Thick nothing, it'll do you good to hear it. And if it is your business you've got to do something about it. I heard your name mentioned at the village Soviet the other day. They need a good village Soviet representative for Koordi, to help Tatrik out. Don't you think it's time you did a little work, my friend, not only for yourself, eh?"

"I?" Paul said blankly. "But I—"

He wanted to say that it was simply impossible for him to take on any job outside Crane farm, for that would affect the building work on the farm, but—a glance at Muuli's shrewd quizzical face told him that he could not possibly say that. Muuli knew about the *Voskresnik*, and perhaps even knew that Semidor had drilled the well for him and Johannes Uustalu had helped him last winter.

"I don't understand what 'buts' there can be about it," Muuli said in surprise. "Hasn't someone got to take Roosi's part?"

Paul did not make much headway with his work that day. He had a sudden desire to go out on a ramble, to "let his thoughts run loose," as he explained to Aino. He got out his fishing rod and handmade reel, fixed a nickel-plated spoon bait to the line and set out to try his luck in the shallow Koordi, where trout and pike sometimes came to the hook.

He went by way of a narrow overgrown field balk. The fading butcher's broom clung about the legs, the blowballs burst at the first touch and sent their seeds on tiny downy umbrellas drifting through the air, and the feet sank into the thick carpet of sweet clover. The summer blossoming had passed and it was al-

ready running to seed. "Soon be time to mow," thought Paul.

As he walked he brooded over recent events. Though they were not, in themselves, events of first magnitude, they nevertheless threatened his own private life with numerous complications—so he thought. Village Soviet representative! That meant that his beat, his field of activity, would include among others the farms of Koor and Känd. It meant in the future meetings and perhaps even clashes with them, didn't it? And just when he was so anxious to steer clear of all that was provocative of worry and vexation in Koordi. He was almost annoyed with himself for having consented to Muuli's proposal without raising any objections.

And how had it all happened, where had he taken the first step towards this appointment? Perhaps he should not have spoken at that meeting last winter, when the machine cooperative board was being elected? But he couldn't help speaking, he had to defend his interests—the fields of Crane farm had needed a tractor. Had not his quarrel with Känd been the second step? And again, how could he have given way to Koor and not stood up for Roosi?

Perhaps he should not have drawn so freely on the help of Muuli himself, of the builder Johannes Uustalu and those good fellows at Jaagu farm, for in accepting their aid and friendship had he not taken obligations upon himself and bound himself to them? It was easy to say, but how could he not bind himself to them when all his first steps were made with their help?

And whichever way Runge looked at it, there was not a single instance in which he could imagine himself acting otherwise than as he had.

A narrow footpath brought Paul out to the steep low bank of the river. Before him flowed the winding Koordi, which took its rise not far from here in the cold springs of the Vodja woods. It was a small but swift and busy river with a rapid current and eddies at the narrow bends. Its water was so clear that the flat smooth limestones on its stony bed could be seen even at dusk, and the darting swarms of fry were distinctly visible. Paul closely scanned the water, tinged silver and scarlet by the setting sun, and tried to make out the movement of the fish.

A water rat was swimming noiselessly upstream along the opposite bank, two silvery

strips running out from its pointed little muzzle as it swiftly cleaved the water.

Paul waited until the rat had disappeared and then flung out the spoon and drew it swiftly through the water, winding the line on the reel. He passed downstream, changing places and trolling methodically as he went along. The fish did not rise to the bait. No, the best time for angling was early in the morning, of course, or after a rain. He laid down his rod, sat on the bank, lit up and listened musingly to the incessant murmur of the stream.

The Koordi was a little river, but the whole wide world was mirrored in it—the noonday sun, and the blue sky, and the farmers' herds going down to their watering place. It was small, but it had everything the big rivers had—trout, and pike, and swarms of fry.

The Koordi was a narrow little river, but it was as full of life and movement as a big river. You only had to know how to make use of it. Had not Mihkel Koor's grandfather built a mill on it and drawn all his wealth from the swift current of the little river? Why couldn't that old derelict mill be repaired? The mill would grind flour again, and a flax scutcher could be set up. And if you installed a

dynamo—all the farms in Koordi would have light.

There were many things you could do and build on the Koordi and on the fields that ran down to its banks. It only wanted to be tackled properly by simple ordinary men, men like Semidor from Koordi. Who knows, perhaps the old man could really fix up a dynamo?

Paul came back at dusk, carrying a small trout on a forked twig threaded through its gills. Aino's pale face on which the freckles stood out sharply alarmed him. She was waiting for him in the yard, and began telling him in a low hurried voice the disjointed story of what she considered to be a terrible occurrence.

"Wait a minute, I can't make head or tail of it," Paul said in a tone that was meant to calm her fears. "You were driving the cow out of the woods, and then what happened?"

"Why, yes.... And I nearly ran into him on the edge of the woods. He was sitting on a tree stump. I recognized him...."

"Recognized whom?"

"Robert Kurvest," Aino answered with a frightened look at Paul.

Paul scratched the back of his head thoughtfully and muttered:

"There's nothing to worry about yet—some dirty dog or other sitting on a stump.... Did he see you?"

"He must have.... I was quite close to him. Then I went by way of the fields and I could feel him looking at me. I was all nervous and afraid to look round—his face was so—"

"That's nothing, I saw plenty of such faces at the front," muttered Paul. "Just an ordinary face as faces go, and sometimes a pretty cowardly one, especially when it looks into the barrel of a gun.... Anyway, enough of this talk, it's all nonsense. I thought, by the look of you, that something serious had happened."

"It's always better to be careful," Aino said in an injured tone.

He said nothing, but judging by the preoccupied air with which he went around the house and the cattle shed before going to sleep, and the fact that he locked the doors himself, and several days later came back from the district centre with a rifle which he hung on the wall, Aino understood that he agreed with her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Roosi slept in the old barn at the edge of the apple orchard. It was cooler there than in the stuffy little room adjoining the master's kitchen. In this section of the barn, where old clothes, lengths of unbleached linen and hanks of wool were stored in two huge chests, stood Roosi's wooden bed under two shabby fur coats hanging on the wall.

A strong wave of delicate scents of clover, caraway and mint poured in through the open door, expelling the keen sourish stench of old wool, flax and leather that had eaten into the very walls. A bunch of wild flowers stood on a little bedside table covered with a white cloth, and at the foot of the bed stood young fragrant birch branches. Had it not been so dark one might have had a glimpse on the white tablecloth of a perfectly new unlighted candle, a white jug of milk and a little plate of sliced ham.

It was a festal board, for a big occasion, only it was a pity that he for whom it was prepared did not come.

Always, with the arrival of dawn, Roosi cleared the table. The unlighted candle and the plates were put away, and the jug carried out. The table, stripped of the white cloth, became simply an ordinary rickety old table, worm-eaten and warped, just as the night, spent in a vigil of thrilled expectancy, turned into a day of drudgery on the farm of Mihkel Koor. For Roosi was over head and ears in debt to Koor.

The next night, however, at midnight, the table was set again, and once more flowers and the unlighted candle stood on it, and Roosi looked at them, thrilled and weaving happy dreams as she tenderly straightened the folds of the tablecloth.

Of course, if it were not Roosi the farm hand but some rich master's daughter of Koordi who was expecting her sweetheart, the table probably would have been richer. Peonies from Koor's garden would have stood on it in place of the wild flowers, and there would have been not only ham on a plate but fried eggs, and tender white pancakes with jam and wine. But this reception, such as it was, could not put Roosi to shame. No, everything was as it should be, with those birches by the wall and in the corner, the flowers and the table.

That close July night, as on previous nights, Roosi was waiting for Kristjan Taaksalu. He had promised to come, though he had not said exactly when. He hadn't come yet, but he had promised and Roosi had faith.

It had been quite recently, when working on the machine at Meisterson's farm, that someone had shouted in a gay voice:

"Oho, Kristjan's paired off with Roosi!"

And so he was, working with Roosi as mate, throwing constant glances at her, laughing gaily as he bombarded her with sheaves and shouted.

"Your boys can't come anywhere near ours. . . ."

Roosi may have yielded the palm in some things, but not when it came to working. Her powerful bronzed arms swung like a chain gear, and when Kristjan paused for a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, Roosi, with unexpected boldness, said:

"No, your hands don't keep pace with your tongue!"

And so, laughing and teasing each other, they had worked with gay frenzy, infecting all those around them with their merriment.

Afterwards he had sat her down on a heap of straw, given her a playful prod in the side and burst out laughing. Kristjan could press a bull's head down to the ground with those hands of his, but the push he gave Roosi might have been a lamb nuzzling into her hand for all she felt it. Looking at his laughing red face she had also burst out laughing without any apparent reason. Infected by each other's merriment, they had gone off into still louder peals of laughter and it was some time before they calmed down. And he had laughingly promised to pay her a visit. She believed that so it would be.

Roosi, as she sat waiting for Kristjan, listening for the creak of the wicket and trying to catch the sound of cautious footsteps, thought how good it would be if it were not Koor but she and Kristjan who lived on this farm, and that orchard and the house and the fields were theirs. They would run the place no worse than Koor, even better, much better. Had she not worked the farm for Koor without the aid of any other farm hands? Kristjan need have no qualms about bringing her to Jaagu farm for that matter—there was no work on it to which Roosi would not be equal. And if it was crowded at Jaagu farm what was to prevent

them building a house for themselves on the land which she had received from the Soviet State?

A dry mild breeze wafted up from the fields the siliceous odour of warmed ears of wheat. It reminded Roosi that threshing would begin on Koor's farm the next day, and she recalled the quarrel that had taken place earlier in the day between Paul Runge and Koor. She had missed the beginning of the quarrel, but when she came out of the cow house she found them facing each other like a pair of enraged cocks.

"Why aren't you going to have the threshing done?" Paul demanded, visibly nettled.

"The grain's damp, that's why," Koor answered.

"That's a lie, I've seen your shocks myself," Runge said. "We can't upset the route of the threshing machine just because of you."

"I know my own time," Koor said angrily. "It's my grain—if I want to I won't thresh it at all."

"Nothing doing there, my friend—there's a ton and a half of grain in it for State deliveries. That's just it," Runge said, suppressing a smile. "So it isn't only your business, see?"

They argued about it for a good half hour, Runge controlling his voice, Koor raising his higher and higher. Finally Paul took his departure, having had his own way.

Mihkel Koor measured the length of the yard with huge strides, brought a bottle out of the pantry, poured himself a glass of homebrew and drank it down in a single long gulp. He stared dully at the kitchen table in silence. His wife Marta, a shrewish and by no means timid woman, threw him a look out of the corner of her eye and walked out of the kitchen without a word. At such moments Mihkel were best left alone—he was capable of striking her.

The calm stillness of the orchard was broken by a faint rustle as of a sheep or a cow brushing past a bush. It might be a man. Roosi's heart began to pound and she felt flushed. She stood silently in the doorway, peering out. Yes, it was a man. A tall dark figure moved slowly and stealthily, bending his head under the branches of the apple trees. There was an instant when the word "Kristjan" all but escaped Roosi's lips.... But the man, instead of making for the barn, walked toward the old uninhabited beehives. That

alone showed it couldn't be Kristjan. Moreover, as she was now able to make out, Kristjan was broader in the shoulders.

Fear gripped Roosi's heart. A thief! Her first impulse was to stretch out her hand and shut the door, but she was afraid to betray her presence if the door creaked. She was divided between fear and an irresistible curiosity and desire to see what would happen next.

The man bent over one of the hives, then after a while he straightened up, paused and went back into the depths of the orchard. He seemed to be carrying something under his arm, a bundle or a sack. He passed close to where she stood, a matter of twenty paces—a tall silent shadow with hunched shoulders, stepping high as though wading through water. There was something disturbingly familiar about the shadowy figure, a momentary flash of something long forgotten, but though she strained her eyes and memory she failed to recognize him, and the shadow disappeared in the cherry thicket, merged into the darkness. Only then did Roosi realize that her knees were shaking, and she shut the door and hooked it.

Trembling all over, she pulled the blanket over her head, buried herself in the hot stuffy

darkness, and the more she thought about this strange occurrence the less could she make of it. It put her in mind of the "forest brethren"—those dreadful despised men, German hirelings who during the German occupation had stained their hands with the blood of their countrymen and who now lurked in the forest like lone wolves, fleeing nemesis. They plundered cooperative stores, raided lonely farmsteads and were known to have made dastardly attempts on the lives of rural activists. But what business had they here, in this apple orchard, where only the appearance of Kristjan would have been understandable? Who was that man—a thief? Hardly. It was a mystery.

The next morning Roosi gingerly approached the beehive and looked in. It contained nothing except some bread crumbs scattered on the floor board.

After hearing out her confused story about the nocturnal visitor Mihkel Koor looked hard at Roosi and frowned.

"You're crazy, woman, what thief are you talking about? Did you recognize him?"

Upon hearing that she hadn't recognized the man, Koor let out an oath and ironically suggested that Roosi had probably had her head filled with village gossip about the band

of "forest brethren" and about Robert Kurvest, who was supposed to have appeared in the neighbourhood, and had no doubt taken a stray calf for a man.

Roosi started and stared at Koor. Perhaps it really was Kurvest's eldest son that shadow had reminded her of? She put it timidly to Koor.

"You're a fool," he said impressively. "Can you swear it was him? And generally, are you sure there was anybody in the orchard at all?"

Roosi faltered and fell silent. She remembered the bread crumbs, but after all they might have been put there by a bird or a mouse, she thought. It wasn't worth insisting on—Mihkel might start keeping a watch on the orchard. And then how would Kristjan come to her? Roosi already regretted having spoken about last night's incident.

"And I advise you in general to keep your mouth shut," Koor went on after a pause. "What if the district authorities call you out and ask you whom you saw in the orchard? They don't believe in silly women's dreams there, and if you start blowing hot and cold they'll suspect you of telling lies. Get me?"

Roosi hid her trembling hands behind her back and said timidly:

"It must have been a calf or a dog, I guess."

"Of course," said Koor. "And you shouldn't sleep in that barn if it acts on you that way."

Roosi herself was afraid to go to sleep in the barn, but when night came she was worried by the thought that Kristjan might come and not find her there.

And so once more Roosi set the table in the barn among the apple trees. She did not sleep at all that night, but no one came—neither the nocturnal visitor nor Kristjan. She was to meet Kristjan a few days later under quite unusual circumstances.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The reaping machines stridulated in Koordi, drowning the thousand-voiced chorus of the grasshoppers. The busy harvesting season had set in, to be followed by the threshing. From sunrise till late in the evening the ripe grain went down under the knives of threshers, and there was the ring of scythes, and sheaves were bound.

The clang of the scythes being whetted of a morning was like an ancient century-old signal which not even the oldest of Koordi's old women could resist. "*Rukkilóikusele!*"* Even those whose interest nothing could kindle save perhaps on occasion the sad and distant tolling of a bell—"whose funeral is that, I wonder?"—straightened their bent backs with a groan, tied their white kerchiefs tighter with gnarled and shrivelled fingers, and pottered anxiously about, making preparations on the eve. For had not the crops ripened? It was in the crops that their entire being and their longevity and every moment of the briefest life

* To the rye harvesting!

were centred. Love and death, marriage and birth, quarrels and joys—everything depended upon the grain harvest. The grain was dearer than the peace of cosy corners, more stirring than the tolling of funeral bells, because it was life itself. Rye! A golden sea of grain rippling on millions of ears in the field under the sun—that elusive happiness which men strive so hard to grasp.

Man may die in winter or in summer, he may cheat death and postpone it by a month, a year or even many years, but harvesting comes with an inevitability that admits of no postponement. You cannot show indifference to it, for the grain will fall to the ground and perish, carrying happiness and life away with it.

And everyone came out into the fields, men and women alike. Here too were pale-faced city dwellers who had come to help their Koordi relatives take in the grain, and old women who followed their grown-up grandchildren into the fields.

The farmers of Koordi thought and spoke of nothing but the harvesting and the threshing. In those days all other topics and events, though they were many, retreated into the background.

A topic of current interest in Koordi was the growing discord in the family of Vao, the local patriarch, head of a family and father of six daughters. Johannes Vao himself, and his neighbours too, considered that he had succeeded by the exercise of stern parental authority in bringing up his children in a spirit of utter devotion to the welfare of their home and farm. Now, unexpectedly for all, it transpired that certain influences had been at work to destroy Johannes' authority over the home and family. It seemed that the children were not at all devoted to the homestead and that old Vao had failed to cultivate in them a love for it. First Aino had quarrelled with her father and gone to Crane farm, then one of the older girls, Valve, had left home and found herself a job as librarian in the neighbouring district. And look at the trick Linda, the youngest, had played! She had suddenly and firmly decided to go to Tallinn to study. And where would you think—at some physical culture college or other! She had made a successful debut in the spring at the country school Olympic games—she had a gift for it, it appeared. Johannes promised to give her a thrashing, but that seemingly had no effect. She kept running, as Johannes indirectly found

out, to Crane farm, to consult her sister or to complain, and after that her mind seemed to be definitely made up.

The children were departing their own ways, ways which they had found without Johannes' help and against his wishes. The only people now left at Vao farm were Johannes and his wife Liina, and one of his daughters, Vilma. And even she might leave at any moment. Who was to harrow and mow, plant and dig potatoes, cart faggots from the woods and do the housework? Had he brought a big family into the world only in order to do all the work for the girls himself in his old age? What would the neighbours say whom he had always amiably assured that a respectable, hard-working farmer could get along perfectly well without hired hands and make a decent living, as he was doing on his own farm?

It was that Crane farm, Paul—that's what now struck Johannes as being the cause of all the trouble not only in his own family but in all Koordi. And Johannes cursed Paul, especially when he got drunk, which he frequently did nowadays. He strode up and down the yard, eyes bloodshot, and one could gather from his deep growling that he was calling down curses on Paul's head.

"What have I worked my fingers to the bone for all my life—that now it should all go up in smoke, eh?" he demanded of Liina. "I, an honest man, was driven even to sin—I stole.... And why? Because I wanted the home to have it...."

He worked himself up this way to such a pitch of self-reproach that his wife was provoked to angry protest.

"You're crazy," she cried in her shrill voice. "What did you steal? How can you say such a thing? Don't tell lies!"

"What? What about those logs in the wood that belonged to the Government?" Johannes plunged on. "And did I pay Anna Kurvest for the cart? Cheated a dead woman—that's what all of you drove me to!"

And Johannes glared at his wife with malicious glee.

Liina burst into tears and waved her hands at him.

"Don't tell lies. Who drove you to it? It was only your greediness.... Why didn't you pay Anna then?"

Johannes meanwhile seized an axe, shouted that he didn't give a damn if the house did go to rack and ruin and that he would smash that cart and send everything to hell there and

then. He stumped out into the yard and soon pandemonium broke loose there. The dog tore up and down on its chain, barking in a frenzy of joy, the fowls ran cackling in a panic about the yard, and Liina stood sobbing in the doorway. Johannes walked up to the cart, but instead of smashing it to pieces he merely hit the strong bottom a deafening blow with the butt end of the axe.

New men were energetically pushing their way into the life of Koordi, and people had a great deal to say about it. Take Paul Runge, for instance. There was a time when many people in the district did not know him or knew him very little. And now he was a representative of the village Soviet. He came into your farmyard, that former farm labourer, and bid you good-day, and your hand involuntarily reached for your cap. To say of this squat-bodied silent young man that he was one of the new settlers, the master of Crane farm, meant to say practically nothing of Paul Runge. He was now a public figure. When he enquired how you were getting on with the harvesting and how the grain was drying, it was not just the idle chatter of a neighbour. You had to give him an exact, detailed and businesslike answer, because Runge had to know how to

regulate the itinerary of the threshing machine. He represented the village Soviet, the district and county authorities, the Republic, the whole State, if you wish. That's the kind of man Paul Runge was!

And, by the looks of it, he was a useful man too. He had succeeded somehow together with Kaarel Maasalu in getting that kid removed from the tractor—Känd's protégé, who inspired confidence in no one either by his efficiency or his conscientiousness. There was another man on the job now—a capable man. Runge had also started talking about light in Koordi, about getting people organized to put it through. Runge might prove a useful man. Truth to tell, Vao wasn't of very much use to the district—just an impressive-looking figure, that's all. He was too slow on the uptake, and too fond of honours.

Runge was sparing of words, he spoke thoughtfully, briefly and to the point, as though he were carving and chiselling his words out of wood—every one of them fitting neatly and securely into its proper place like a piece of dovetail work. No wonder people said he was a pupil of that great village carpenter Johannes Uustalu. Just the kind of man they needed in Koordi.

There was disagreeable news in Koordi as well—a group of bandits, the "forest brethren," had appeared in the neighbourhood. Farmers complained about the disappearance of sheep and calves. Some activists in the district were said to have received anonymous letters with a skull and crossbones drawn on them, and people said that Muuli, the Party organizer, had been shot at on the forest road, luckily without harm. All this was associated with the name of Robert Kurvest, former sergeant-major in the German army, whom people were said to have seen on forest roads armed with a tommy gun. These rumours were alarming and disturbing and interfered with the smooth and peaceful progress of the harvesting.

They were having a busy time at Crane farm too. All day long Paul and Aino carted sheaves up from the fields and stacked them in the farmyard. It was quite a big stack. It stood all finished, compactly built up and smoothed down on all sides with the pitchfork, and Paul and Aino were unable to tear themselves away from it. After all, here in this stack of grain was all of Paul's inexhaustible doggedness, all the anxieties and difficulties met and overcome during six months of life

in Koordi, all the hard-earned fruits of their grinding toil, and the future of Crane farm.

"Probably a ton and a quarter to the hectare, what do you say?" Paul asked Aino after a long and thoughtful inspection of the stack.

"Probably," Aino guessed, but in a confident tone.

"The grain's heavy," Paul said after a pause. "Perhaps there'll be a ton and a half, eh?"

"It's very possible," Aino acquiesced still more readily. "I'm almost certain.... The grain's heavy, you know."

They spoke about the grain, but thought about the building of the new cattle shed, the foundation for the new house, and about their new comfortable life in it. Every bushel of the new harvest brought that life nearer.

First Paul and then Aino gazed anxiously at the sky. The sun—you could now look at it with the naked eye—was setting in a welter of crimson. Pared off from underneath by the ridge of the distant hill and on top by the blade of a long, narrow, smoke-blue cloud, the fiery sun at this hour resembled a piece of red-hot iron flattened out on the anvil. The wind rose.

"I only hope it doesn't bring rain," Paul said, looking worried.

"It won't," Aino reassured him, though she did not like the look of the sunset. But she wanted to believe that the wind would not drive any clouds up, and if it did, that they would pass to the side. For the grain was in the yard!

It had grown quite dark outside by the time they finished their supper, in the light of the oil lamp. The wind freshened and touched the roof, now here, now there.

They were about to go to bed when they heard the sound of footsteps; somebody pressed hard against the locked door, then knocked.

Aino sprang to her feet and caught hold of Paul's arm as he slowly rose to go to the door.

"Don't open it ..." she whispered with her lips alone.

"Who is it?" Paul asked loudly, and said to Aino in a low voice:

"Go into the room. Depend on me."

"Open the door—it's from the district centre," a man's unfamiliar voice answered in a muffled tone.

"What's the name? Who are you?" Paul took the gun off the wall.

"From the district centre—open the door!" The knock was imperatively repeated.

Paul crouched silently by the door, trying to guess by the sounds who that stranger was on the other side of the bolted door. The knocking, now close to his face—the man was using his fist now—battered against his ears, went through his entire body and seemed to be shaking the old walls of the ramshackle house and the whole of Crane farm. . . .

The knocking suddenly ceased. Paul caught the sound of a short muffled colloquy, something clanked and footfalls could be heard moving along the wall.

Paul reached the kitchen in a single bound and blew out the lamp. He was in the nick of time. Shots rang out in the yard and mingled with the tinkling of shattered glass. The wind tore into the kitchen. . . .

Paul dropped to the floor against the wall.

"Aimed too high . . ." the happy thought flashed through his mind.

"Lie down!" he commanded Aino in a fierce whisper.

Another burst from the tommy gun riddled the window in the room. Then there was silence. Paul cautiously placed the barrel-end of his gun on the window sill bestrewn with

broken glass and, aiming at the logs stacked out in the yard, where he thought he caught a sign of movement, he pulled the trigger. The heavy calibre shotgun barked twice in quick succession and threw out a sheet of flame. Paul dropped to the floor again and crawled to the side. Another burst of fire came through the window.

"You're not hurt, Aino?" Paul asked huskily in the darkness.

"No," came the answer from the room.

Paul peered in and saw Aino crouching by the other window. He thought he caught the dull glint of an axe in her hand. Bad as things were, he nevertheless grinned his approval.

The minutes went by in an agony of suspense and uncertainty as to what the bandits would do next. Paul cautiously peeped out of the window into the menacing night, but could see nothing. They were here—of that he was sure—but what were they up to? He only hoped they didn't have any hand grenades and wouldn't start throwing them through the window....

Reloading his gun, he lay on his side, keeping an eye on the window and casting about in his mind for a way out of the situa-

tion. He might risk jumping out of the back window under cover of the dark and bring up assistance.... But that was impossible—he couldn't leave Aino alone. Perhaps they would hear the shooting in the village and come to the rescue? Känd's house was less than half a kilometre away, but would he risk coming if he heard the shots? Certainly not. The other farms were still farther off. No, he was all on his own.... That was bad.

Paul sighed and looked up. The window seemed to have grown brighter and reddish patches of light fell across the floor. There was a smell of smoke....

"The grain!" was the anguished thought that flashed through his head. "They're setting fire to the stack.... And this damned wind on top of it!"

The flickering shadows of the fire darted across the yard, and the rye stack stood sharply outlined against the blackness of the night, illumined by the tremulous red light. The hard-packed straw was slow to catch fire, but the wind helped. The smoke and sparks flew straight toward the cattle shed nearby. Its bone-dry roof began smouldering here and there.

To lie there and not dare even to raise his hand, leave alone rush out! Paul gnashed his teeth.

"The animals . . ." Aino cried piteously.

Paul fired a shot at random into the night. The answering shots came immediately. They were waiting for him to rush out. . . . The devil, wouldn't even the fire attract attention in the village? It might not—the farm stood behind the forest.

The cow mooed plaintively in the cattle shed.

Aino, losing her head completely, rushed across Paul, struck the door and began groping frantically for the bolt. Paul's arm shot out and he gripped her by the leg and pulled her down to the floor.

"Have you gone mad?" he rasped fiercely.

Aino sobbed and clawed at the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Semidor pounded furiously with his fists on the door of the Jaagu farmhouse.

Kaarel Maasalu, sleepy-eyed and annoyed, opened the door.

"A fire...." Semidor gasped, clutching Kaarel's sleeve and dragging him into the room. "Look out the window.... Runge's on fire!"

"Where's the fire, how come a fire?" Maasalu pulled him up sharply, his eyes still heavy with sleep. He had just gone to bed and fallen into a sound sleep. His back ached and felt numb after the day's work. He drew the curtain back from the window.

"It isn't Paul's way at all," he muttered, looking at the reddish glow over the distant forest. "Why should there be a fire at Paul's? I'll tell you what's burning. It's Tatrik's hay shed out in the forest swamp, or maybe it's a forest fire.... This dryness and the wind...."

Taaksalu came up barefooted and tousled and also pressed his face to the window.

"It's Tatrik's shed, if you ask me, or perhaps Lauri's," he corroborated. "Look how it's blazing! It's a good kilometre past Crane farm."

The house was astir. Alviina lit the lamp and in her excitement had difficulty fitting the chimney on the burner. Kristjan's mother pottered about in a nervous flutter.

Semidor looked at Kaarel, then at Kristjan, shifted his weight helplessly from one foot to the other and seemed to wilt and lose interest.

"I dare say it's in the woods—someone lit a bonfire and forgot about it," he muttered. "The moss is dry as powder. Maybe it's the sheds. Yes, that's probably what it is...."

Semidor was prepared, as always, to yield to the more competent opinion and laugh at his own fears—but the red glare outside preyed on his mind, seemed to stir him, gave him no peace. He pressed his face to the window again and stared out for a minute or so, and when he turned they were all struck by his distorted features.

"Runge's on fire!" he shouted frantically. "I tell you Runge's on fire...."

Clutching his head he suddenly whimpered in a thin odd voice, threw his hands up and

darted about the room in an agony of despair —his little dishevelled figure anything but comical at that moment. Some deep and overpowering emotion swept him up to the crest, took complete possession of him and left no room for his quondam timidity, his lack of faith in his own powers, in his own thoughts and feelings. It was as though he were on the verge of death, as he had been at the bottom of that narrow well on Saaremaa, when the fuse was burning out at his feet.... It was as though his own poor hut were burning out there on the island, and sinister sparks were flying around. Night stared with black empty eyes into the face of the man waging his lone fight with disaster....

"Crane farm is burning—Paul!" he shrieked, and stamped his foot in its ragged boot which he had hastily pulled on his bare foot. "Do you hear what I tell you? Come on!"

This was all so sudden that Maasalu came wide awake in an instant. He thrust the tobacco pouch he was just opening back into his pocket without lighting up. Taaksalu stared wild-eyed and open-mouthed at the raving Semidor.

Maasalu flung the window open and leaned out. A cool dry wind blew sharply into

his face. And everyone in the room heard two shots, muffled by the wind and the distance, come from the direction of the woods, followed by a burst from a tommy gun—like peas being dropped into a frying pan.

Maasalu recoiled from the window with a dark frown on his face.

"Harness the horse and cart, Semidor, quick," he commanded in a tone that was not to be denied. "Get dressed, Kristjan. All be ready in three minutes. Alviina, two buckets in the cart—an axe, the boat hook. . . ."

Meanwhile he pulled on his heavy top boots.

Semidor ran out into the yard. The doors of the stable and the cart shed creaked. Taaksalu moved about like a bear in the kitchen and in his haste upset a bucket.

They tumbled into the cart and dashed off in the darkness down the country road. The wind whipped their hats and the flaps of their jackets.

Maasalu lashed the galloping horse in tight-lipped silence. Behind him, back to back with Taaksalu, sat Semidor, convulsively gripping the sides of the jolting and swaying cart and twisting his neck painfully in the direction of the fire.

With Maasalu in the driver's seat, sitting like a sturdy oak, a spring wound up for action, Semidor had no more fears. In Maasalu's hands everything would go right—he could drive a nail into a tree with a single unerring blow and split a tough birch stump with one stroke of the axe; the scythe he had whetted was capable of mowing a willow thicket; a house built by him would stand for ages. Maasalu had everything that he, Semidor, lacked—ability and luck. Maasalu would save the day, of that you might be sure! Semidor at that moment was prepared to worship him.

Maasalu turned the horse's head in the direction of the lighted window of the district Soviet building. The wheels ground on the gravel and pulled up sharply. Maasalu threw down the reins and clumped up the porch steps.

Through the locked door he asked for the Party organizer Muuli.

"The Party organizer has gone to a seminar in town," a sleepy-eyed invalid doing night duty informed him, holding the door close and eyeing the group on the porch with suspicion.

"The telephone then!" Maasalu said, making his way resolutely past the stoop-shouldered invalid into the yellow lamp light and the office smells toward the desks.

The invalid lowered himself listlessly onto a broad bench polished smooth by long service. There was an air of lassitude and drowsiness even in the ample folds of his huge jacket, obviously not his own, as he hugged a rifle of some unknown type, uncleaned and rusty as his own stubbly cheeks. He blinked in astonishment. What was the idea, tearing in in the middle of the night? You'd think there was a house on fire! He asked Semidor for a smoke. Semidor gave him his tobacco pouch. He recognized him—old Villu, a local peasant, a master-hand at all kinds of woodwork.

Maasalu furiously cranked the telephone handle.

From somewhere far away came a crackling noise, the sobbing of a violin, then a distant feminine voice answered apathetically.

Kaarel Maasalu, his jaws locked in a stony spasm, was unable to say a word. Whom in the world could he ask for on that pitch-black night, in the quiet light of the lamp that lit up the sleepy face of Villu, when a man was in dire straits—Paul Runge, his comrade, his friend, with whom he had felled trees in the Vodja woods, with whom he had eaten dry rye bread and cut up pork fat in thin little slices? Where could he seek aid?

The feminine voice spoke again, irritably this time. Then Kaarel found his tongue.

"The Party!" he roared. "Give me the Party!"

The operator said she didn't understand.

"Why, the County Committee of the Party...." Maasalu roared, overjoyed at having hit on the right words. "The County Committee.... Whoever's on duty...."

Taaksalu and Semidor, afraid to breathe, bored the back of his head with their eyes.

And Maasalu, glued to the telephone and sawing the air with his fist, shouted about an attack, about a fire and shooting at Crane farm. He repeated it again to someone else who came up to the telephone.

"They're coming down by car—be here in half an hour," he said triumphantly, turning to his friends. "Well—let's hurry!"

He pulled up suddenly in the doorway, looked round at the invalid, strode swiftly back and grabbed the gun in businesslike silence.

Villu's eyes popped and he clutched at the rifle, yammering, but at this point Taaksalu gently pushed him back on his seat with his elbow and said impressively:

"Sit still.... This is a State matter.... Any cartridges?"

Villu got out some cartridges from the dangling pocket of his lopsided jacket.

And again they dashed into the black night toward the red glow in the sky.... Hang on, Paul Runge, hang on, old man!

Had the good mare Hilde ever galloped so hard in her life as she did that night? Hilde, who was half Maasalu's and half Semidor's. Between the two she was taken good care of, though they sometimes querulously reproached each other with negligence. She had grown plump as a result. And now one was driving her unmercifully, inflexible as iron, while the other egged him on in a strident voice:

"Give it to her, the jade!"

Sparks flew from the stones that fell beneath Hilde's hoofs.

It was a mad night....

Semidor afterwards related the events of that night on more than one occasion. Warming to his subject, he told how they had left Hilde among the bushes and started crawling toward the burning farm. It was light for a kilometre around, and the farm lay spread before their eyes, even to the starling birdhouse in the birch tree. The rye stack was burning, the shed was on fire and a corner of the house was beginning to burn.... They crawled close

up through the ditch as far as the bushes and saw two men with guns hiding behind the logs. Maasalu took aim and fired. The two men rushed this way and that and stared about in bewilderment. Maasalu fired again while Taaksalu put his fingers in his mouth and gave a piercing whistle. The men—there proved to be three of them—made a dash for the field, running bent low, and one of them lagged behind —he was limping, obviously wounded.... Paul and his wife rushed out into the yard.... Aino —just think of it!—made a beeline for the burning shed to save the animals, the crazy woman.... Paul dashed after her. Easier said than done! Just try to lead cattle out of a burning shed! They won't come out for anything. Only Antu, the old gelding, bless him, followed Paul out of the shed. By that time the militiamen came dashing up. Where'd they go, they asked? Maasalu joined them in the hunt. Then people started coming up from Koordi. Set about saving what they could....

The people formed a chain from the well to the fire. Aino took the first place by the well, elbowing someone out of the way. It was her place as the mistress of Crane farm for which

she was determined to fight to the last sheaf of rye, to the last ember.

Tatrik quickly received the buckets from her hands. His face looked solemn, as though it were on the tip of his tongue to say: "When I married Mari. . . ."

The morose, unsociable Meisterson, who lived in an out-of-the-way spot, also fell into the line of fire fighters. How could you not help an honest farmer in trouble! "Get into trouble yourself, and no one will help you . . ." he had argued with his wife at home when she had tried to keep him from going to the fire.

Ants Lauri, and unobtrusive little Priidu Murumets who lived on the edge of Snake Swamp, were there too. . . . Those damned bandits, devil take 'em! Here was a man who was just getting on his feet after hard work and was beginning to speak about things that were useful to everybody—planning a big thing like fixing up light in Koordi—and now they hit him across the legs as with a scythe, damn 'em! Hand 'em up quick, stir your stumps there! Priidu, make it snappy, we'll save all we can!

Roosi Rist stood paired with Kristjan—how it came about they neither of them knew. Roosi

worked with fervid self-oblivion, handing up to Kristjan bucket after bucket brimming over with precious water. To rescue people who had set out, just the two of them, to build a warm roof over their heads, to till the land and make themselves a home, a family—to save all this, fight for it—oh, Roosi understood this only too well!

Kristjan brought up the rear of the line. He received the buckets from Roosi's hands and splashed them over the sizzling embers with powerful sweeps of the arm, dashing out the flames, mowing down the pillars of acrid smoke. His very silence and the measured movements of his body expressed, as it were, agreement with Roosi's thoughts. Yes, we must save the man, and so we will if we tackle it all together, we'll smother and stamp out the fire, put up the house again, build up the walls. . . .

The whole living chain of fire fighters was kept going by Semidor. He worked the handle of the well with unabating fury, drenched in hot sweat and cold water, hatless and dishevelled. He turned the handle without a stop, muttering exultantly to himself—or was it to Paul, lost amid the hurly-burly:

"There, you see—good we opened up the water...."

The first pale glimmerings of the dawn rose above Crane farm—that moment when the earth becomes visible to the very horizon, but the sun has not yet appeared, though it can be felt very near, inevitable, welcome and beautiful. At any moment now the tips of the highest firs would be ablaze with light.

With the rising of the sun everything fell into its proper place. The sounds of pursuit and shooting died away in the distant woods. The autumnal forest grew bright, translucent and joyous in a carnival of scarlet and yellow. The fire, which had seemed so menacing in the night, was now merely a black charred spot under a sky of dazzling blue. The cattle shed, with its black ribs bared to the sky, did not look so terrifying now either. Only the half-burnt rye stack with the steam rising from it stood as a vivid reminder of the night. But here too friendly hands were already busy with pitchforks, combing it out and cleaning off the black ashes, and reassuring voices were heard to say that half the rye was still intact, all it needed was drying and it could go straight into the threshing machine.

Paul sat down on a log. He had grown haggard overnight and a bruise showed red on his cheek, but he was unaware of either this or his burnt hands black with soot. His eyes were inflamed and feverishly bright from lack of sleep, excitement and fatigue. He felt dizzy and a mist swam before his eyes. He stared round him absently, trying to collect his thoughts.

What a crowd there was! When had they come, these people of Koordi—Tatrik and Lauri, and even little Priidu Murumets, the marsh dweller, whom he hardly knew, and Taaksalu, and Semidor—most of them from his section. Koor and Känd were not there, though. But others had come to help.... He hadn't done much for any of them, yet they had come....

And there was Maasalu, good old Maasalu. What was he saying? They caught them. Two of them. Who? Robert Kurvest.... Why, of course, Maasalu had gone out after the bandits and now he was back and surrounded by the crowd.

"We combed the whole forest," Maasalu was saying. "They put up resistance, the rats.... Kurvest's wounded in the leg."

Bah!... And who was that striding up with such a staid air, the grey-whiskered bull-necked

man with broad sagging shoulders and a faded black soft hat pulled down over his forehead like a mushroom? It couldn't be Johannes Vao, surely?

It was Johannes. He came last, but he came.

He took a good look around, stopped suddenly before the half-burnt stack and superstitiously pulled off his hat. He couldn't stand that fellow Paul Runge, it was true—but to burn his crops? He took his hat off to the burnt crop. Three generations of the Vao family bristled up in him, his ancestor Taavet himself grew wroth and lifted his head, that same Taavet who had purchased his freedom from the baron and was the first to come to Vao farm, where there had been nothing but forest, bogs and rocks. Those rocks, which he had pulled out to clear a field for the crops, had been the death of him—he overtaxed himself. The life of each subsequent generation of the Vaos had been spent in clearing and tilling and adding a few hectares to the field that Taavet had started. Grain was precious as life itself, and the man who dared to raise his hand against it was a murderer. He, Johannes Vao, was prepared to curse that man.

Paul saw, he could not help seeing, the obvious sympathy that showed in the glances

directed toward him. Someone gave Paul some advice or other, someone offered him the loan of his cart. Yes, of course, the cart and the sledge as well had gone up in smoke....

But strange to say, the burden of his loss no longer seemed an unbearable weight. Was it not because Semidor was here, and Kaarel, and Kristjan, and Roosi over there, and all those other folk from Koordi....

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

From the country lane Mihkel Koor turned onto the broad highway. His narrowed eyes under a faded but still respectable-looking hat gazed gloomily and searchingly at the fields which had long since been cropped and were now tinged with the rust of autumn.

Autumn, yes, autumn.... It was in the pungent smell of the potato leaves, here and there nipped by the night frosts, and in the sparkle of the cold dew that had settled on the cobwebs among the roadside bushes. The winged seeds of the dandelion no longer quivered in the webs and there were no July flies here to be caught clamouring in their meshes, yet the spiders went on spinning their flimsy nets, drawing them over the clover aftermath, and attaching them to blades of grass that accidentally escaped the mower's scythe. But there were no more flies....

The highroad, or rather the stretch of it between Koordi and town, had been used much and often by the Koors since garndfather's day. It was as familiar to them as their own

path that ran from the door of their house to the barn in the Karu farmyard. The Koors generally avoided long journeys. "You'll squander your purse on a long journey," grandfather Otto used to say, "but you'll pick up a needle near home." And they did. Otto himself, in his old age, was fond of boasting when in his cups that he had built up the farm out of flour dust. So he had.

There were not many people on this road who did not recognize the Koors from afar by their thoroughbred horses and their style of riding—holding the middle of the road at a spanking pace. Grandfather Otto understood a thing or two about horses, bred them for sale and went in for jobbing in a small way. In the old days of the Russian empire famous horse fairs were held in the quiet little county town, where high-necked chargers were purchased for the horseguard regiments. Otto used to take his grandson with him to these fairs to teach him the tricks of the trade.... But by the time the farmstead passed to the grandson, those picturesque mettlesome horses with arched necks were no longer in demand. Not so bacon! Bacon went to England, to Germany and even to New Zealand. Pale-pink bacon with just the

right streak of meat in it. The women farm hands at Karu farm bred a herd of Yorkshire porkers that were mountains of pale-pink meat, like walking bacon.

Between the sellers and the bacon market there stood the Meat Export Company. One of the meat exporters built himself a house behind a wall not far from these parts. The gates were adorned with stone globes. It was a villa, not a house. The farmers spat ironically when they passed it and said bitterly, as though calling to mind grandfather Otto's words about the flour dust:

"Look at the villa that's been built out of our pigs' tails."

And the Koors lined their pockets too....

The bay mare stepped out at a brisk trot. The Koors never had poor horses—so it had been since grandfather's day. Besides, the load was not a heavy one, only two sacks of rye.

A stone wall came in sight, bordered with denuded acacias. It was the Church of St. Anne, with a lightning rod on the spire poised warily in the cold blue sky of autumn. The stony recesses behind the nailed-up door, like a moth-eaten wedding frock coat in the depths of a massive barn locker, preserved the memory of Koor weddings. Those cold stone slabs had

been trodden by the broad bearlike feet of the Koors, who stepped on them firmly and surely as they would across the threshold of their own home, leading their brides squeezed into wedding gowns. The ceremony over, the impressive wedding procession of thirty, forty, fifty carts filled with guests took off in a thunder of wheels and galloping hoofs, each cart trying to outrace the other. In front, slightly ahead of the column—so as not to mix with the others—in a *drozhki* drawn by a thoroughbred stallion, rode Koor and his bride, woodenly clutching a huge bouquet in her arms.

Beyond the church stood the cemetery. Here grandfather Otto had bought a burial place—seemingly not for departing life, but for perpetual sojourn in it, along the short road from Karu farm to the county town. The same desire not to mix with the nameless sunken mounds around it was eloquent in the stone enclosure with the iron grating. The clumsy stone cross on grandfather's grave and the iron one on his father's spoke also of the durability of the grindstones in grandfather's mill.

The road changed to cobblestone at the approaches to the town, and the horse slackened its pace.

The wheels rumbled over the level crossing of the narrow-gauge track. And here were the outskirts. The whole town was like a suburb—single-storey wooden houses with apple and cherry trees in the gardens. The stone buildings stood in a cluster near the station. Here, by the stone barns, a red streamer was drawn across the road: "We'll Deliver More Grain to the State!" Carts loaded with sacks of grain were lined up along the street under the streamer. Stones clinked under the stamping hoofs of the horses as they stood munching hay and oats. There was a fusty smell of damp earth, horse dung and something else peculiarly autumnal. Women muffled in shawls sat patiently in the carts munching on home-cooked fare and throwing eggshells into the road under the feet of the horses. The men stood in knots smoking pipes and hand-rolled cigarettes. Mihkel rode down the column, every now and then raising his hand to his hat, for there were many acquaintances from the district. His manner was dignified as he looked out over the woollen shawls, the champing mouths and curious eyes. He sensed a peculiar intentness and a trace of irony in the long looks the men gave him and the glances the women stole at him. Turning his head, he noticed

Mother Tilde, the one-cow woman, whispering animatedly into the ear of Tatrik's wife—about him, no doubt. They both shook their heads, and there was censure in the tight set of their lips.

Mihkel shrugged his shoulders. They were talking about his two sacks of rye, of course—he could even feel that with his back. These one-cow women, whose entire norm for State delivery was fixed at one or two sacks—they had brought it all—would have liked to see him, Koor, bring up his whole share in three carts. Jealousy, that's what was eating them.

Anger flared up in Mihkel's heart. Don't be in such a hurry, Mother Tilde—three cartloads aren't three sacks! Don't peep into another man's farmyard.

The next touch of his hat was a more affable gesture. Brother-in-law Juhan Känd with a flushed and shining face—he had already managed to have a drop somewhere—greeted him from the eminence of a loaded cart and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Hullo Mihkel, lost all your sacks on the way?"

The smile Mihkel had summoned up vanished from his face. He nodded curtly and rode on to the end of the line, where he modestly

took up his position behind someone's square back in a canvas waterproof. He stretched his numb legs with pleasure, put the nose bag over the horse's head and went for a stroll, seeing he had at least three hours to wait.

He pushed at the door of a yellow booth—a bar—but it was still closed. He sauntered off in the direction of a two-storied windowless building resembling a gigantic box of grey concrete from which came a pounding sighing noise and where a fine white dust lay on the ground. This was the flour mill. The cart line was shorter here, flour being milled only against certificates that the holders had fulfilled their State deliveries. But there was a different line here, or rather a group of people, about twenty of them, darting in and out among the carts—for the most part women with sacks and youngsters in drab peasant overcoats girded with a belt, all of them asking: "Any flour to sell, Pa? What's your price?"

Such a high price was being paid for grain and flour of first and second grades and even for grey flour that the sellers themselves were flabbergasted. They didn't know what price to ask.... One old fellow spent a long time counting a fat wad of notes but finally gave it up and bundled the money into his pocket.

"So there it is!" Koor thought with sharpened eyes as he greedily drank in the smell of flour dust.

So that's what the laconic newspaper lines about the crop failure in the fertile regions of the Soviet Union meant in practice. True, the newspapers had also said that the difficulties would be overcome in a very short time, but that did not interest Koor so much and did not impinge itself upon his mind. Yes, grain was dear.... No, Mother Tilde, don't you be in such a hurry!

He squared his shoulders with a swaggering air and went back. The line had moved up, but very little. He found his brother-in-law Känd engaged in conversation with a young man wearing a camera on a strap. The young man, dressed in spruce riding breeches fitting snugly about the knees, was bright-eyed and amiable and was feverishly jotting down notes in his notebook. The pencil dashed over the paper and could barely keep pace with the answers Känd gave as he stood leaning against the sacks with an air of complacency.

Yes, he had carted up six hundred kilograms of rye. First-grade rye. He didn't have to make any State deliveries the first year,

being a new settler, but he looked at it as a matter of conscience.

He, Känd, was the chairman of the machine cooperative in his village. There had been difficulties at first, of course—it was all new—but now he had things running smoothly....

The pencil broke. He of the bright eyes swore and hastily fished up another stump from his pocket. Finally, shutting his notebook with an air of solemnity, the bright-eyed young man swiftly levelled his camera at Känd and asked him to look cheerful. Känd stuck out his chest, and the laddie waved his hand—just a little left, please, that'll do nicely—got to get the bags in too!... When he had finished he wrung Känd's hand warmly, muttering gratitude.

"It's our duty," Känd said urbanely. "Got to set an example...."

"Where's he from?" Koor asked guardedly when the gay cap of the bright-eyed young man could be seen bobbing in the vicinity of Mother Tilde.

"From the newspaper," Känd let fall with studied nonchalance, then—he certainly had a way with him, did Känd—he drew his arm through his brother-in-law's: "Let's try the bar, a mug of beer, eh?"

They were assailed by a hubbub and the heavy sourish odour of beer and home-grown tobacco as they squeezed their way with difficulty past the wide-brimmed hats and stiff canvas rain capes of men from the grain column. Känd nodded his head to right and left, proffered his soft hand with its fat fingers and threw out ponderous jests. He was hail-fellow-well-met with every man. He hustled Mihkel to a small table in a dark corner, pushed the used mugs aside with his elbow and placed full ones on the table. He winked and showed the tip of a wood-corked bottle sticking out of his pocket—what do you say?

"It's the real stuff—*Metsa kohin**—racked off specially for me in the forest thickets!"

In the stuffy smoky heat, after a glass of this bottled earthquake, Mihkel's ruffled feelings were somewhat mollified and he relaxed. He gave cursory attention to his brother-in-law's chatter about a bee swarm he had discovered in the hollow of a lime tree. He was impatient to compare notes on his recent impressions carried away from the flour mill. He said:

"I looked in at the mill. Flour's in pretty good demand...."

* Forest murmurs.

"That's right," Känd agreed. "It's a good time to sell."

"You seem to have plenty to throw away—cartloads," Mihkel said with a wink, hinting at his brother-in-law's cart waiting for delivery.

"What of it?" Känd dismissed the matter with an airy gesture, then added sarcastically, as between relatives: "Are you that poor?"

"I'm not complaining," Koor grumbled touchily. "I mentioned it because you're sort of beating down the price. Whetting people's appetite. As if to say—here's a fine fish for you, grab me by the gills...."

Känd replenished the glasses in silence out of the unlabelled bottle. His idle chatter ceased for a brief space, and his moist eyes, very bright on his browless face, wandered indeterminately over his brother-in-law.

"Nothing of the sort," he muttered grudgingly. "The squirrel collects his nuts but the little boys see him doing it just the same. Everyone sees through you as plain as the nose on your face. You shouldn't irritate people the way you're doing...."

"What do you mean?" Koor asked in surprise.

"Just what I say—irritating those you shouldn't," Känd said with a chuckle, dropping

into his old inane tone. "Never mind, have another drink."

"What about you—don't you irritate folks?" Mihkel asked, slowly pushing back the glass and trying to catch his brother-in-law's eye. "The farmers are saying no one can make out whether the tractor's working for Känd or for the cooperative."

"That's Maasalu stirring up trouble," Känd answered imperturbably. "Tractor be hanged!" he said airily. "If need be it'll work for the cooperative. Only that time hasn't come yet."

He chuckled again inanely and began chattering about the bee swarm.

"Believe it or not, but I got a whole pail of honey out of it!" he bawled, staring at Koor in mock amazement. "Spit in my face if I'm lying. That enamelled pail I bought off old Kukk—you saw it yourself—full up. Those little bees, they went around collecting too, ho-ho-ho. . . ."

Mihkel, his eyes smarting from the smoke, scrutinized his brother-in-law's face. Känd's face with its hard round cheeks and short strong nose was well filled out and perfectly smooth—try if you can to get a hold on a man like that, your hand would slip off as from a

ball. There wasn't a spot you could grip hold of, even the eyelids had no lashes and his flaxen hair was combed sleekly to the back of his head like a close-fitting hood.

When, at last, he reached the little window and handed in the test sample of his grain in a tin can, he read astonishment and unspoken censure in the faces of the young girl clerk and the laboratory girl who looked through his papers. The weigher too—a chatterbox and a wag—weighed his two sacks in silence, called out the figure apathetically and did not vouchsafe a joke.

"Never mind, that's good enough," Koor said to himself with a sweet sense of malicious glee as he folded the receipt and put it away in his huge skimpy wallet. He sauntered about the market place, bought a few odds and ends, then jauntily took his seat in the cart and rumbled over the cobblestones toward home. The unpleasant aftertaste of that morning which had weighed on his spirits disappeared completely, as though he had filled his lungs with the fresh and bracing wind in town.

That's all right, let them give him black looks—all those Mother Tildes, those one-cow women and that frizzled chit in the screaming

frock behind the office window. He was the boss of his own grain and if they didn't like it they could lump it.

What with the measured hoofbeats of the horse and the swift ride all kinds of acute and troubled thoughts crept into his fuddled mind. He recalled with an unpleasant twinge the warning Känd had casually let fall: "You're irritating people...." He pictured to himself the figure of Runge, like a ruffled bull, coming undeviatingly down the path to the Karu farm—for the nth time!—and the tiresome sickening argument that would follow. The skin drew taut on Koor's sharp cheekbones and he shook himself as though thrusting off something annoying, pestering, hateful.... A feeling of harsh resentment swept over him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Roosi had a great deal of patience. She could endure the minor adversities of life with perfect equanimity. She did not look forward to a speedy fulfilment of her wishes, because she was not used to easy achievements. Even bread, that bread with the impress of the cabbage leaf on its lower crust which she tasted fresh only once a week and all the other days ate dry and hard like clay, was not easily come by. You had to work hard with rake and pitchfork and swing the scythe from sunrise to sundown till all the bones in your body ached, before you earned the right to add to your bread some boiled potatoes with salted fish and cream cheese. As for pouring cream over the cheese, only others, people like Koor, could afford themselves that luxury—Roosi couldn't. She understood this and did not give way to despair, though her dream of living an independent life in her own little cottage was so very slow in coming true. However, Roosi now had land, and a red cow which she had received from Koor. She tended the cow with the

loving care and heartache only a person striving after an independent life is capable of. Roosi also garnered an oat crop of sorts. Of course, these things were not enough to build a cottage on yet, however small it might be, but it was a step towards it. And so Roosi, consoling herself with this thought, was able to put up with a good deal, even the vagueness of her relations with Mihkel Koor, a vagueness, by the way, which made itself felt at every step.

Koor moved all the vetch on Roosi's fields and carted it to his barn. She helped him do it. Listening to his grumblings and growlings about big expenses and a wretched crop and the high cost of bread and milk—for Roosi ate his bread—her heart sank at the thought that he might demand a share of the oat crop on top of all, and perhaps even of the potatoes which had not yet been gathered from the field. And she laid about her with redoubled energy, raking together the vetch and pitchforking gigantic bunches of it into Koor's cart in utter silence, in order by this gruelling back-breaking toil and resignation to limit the secret designs which Mihkel harboured. Her heart went into her mouth every time she caught Koor's gaze coming thoughtfully to

rest on her potato field. "At a pinch three furrows for the seed, say—five—I worked it with his horse . . ." she was ready in her heart to concede.

One day Koor announced that they would have to settle accounts about the cow—after all, she had had the use of her for a year; these were not the times they used to be, and he couldn't afford to throw cows about. He was taking his cow back and giving Roosi a yearling calf instead. It was a pedigree calf—would make a good cow in two or three years. . . .

The conversation took place at noon in the cow house. Roosi was sitting on a stool milking her red cow. Roosi's care and management had done the red cow good; she looked better than the master's cows. Roosi heard Koor out without turning her head—only the splash of the milk jet in the pail ceased for a time. Then, after Koor had gone out, she finished the milking—you couldn't leave it in the udder—got up and made for the door in a daze, feeling as though something inside her had snapped. She could not go to her room—what if Koor were there, with his pale stark face? She went into the cattle kitchen, put down the milk pail, sat down on a rock and fell lost in thought.

Roosi felt one thing—something had to happen. And if nothing happened she would see to it herself that it did. She could stand a lot, she could silently endure months of gnawing anxiety, in constant fear of her master's appetite—but this?... Roosi could not give up the red cow, that was clear to her. She was prepared to suffer anything herself, even to fall ill, perhaps, but give up the cow—never! That would mean relinquishing her dream.

Thoughts thronged in her mind. Go to the district centre, tell them about it, or write to town, to the capital, to some important person, or take it to court.... But what did they know in the district centre or in town about her oral agreement with Koor? How could she prove her claim to the red cow, all the more since it still figured as Koor's in the district records, now that Roosi thought of it. Nothing would come of it all, however much she was in the right.... Impotent rage welled up in Roosi's heart against the man whose face reminded her of a gnawed cow's bone. Other people lived according to the law, the first share of the crop they honestly delivered to town, to the elevators—trains were delivering it to the State—that big and kind State which had given Roosi

land free of charge and promised her a cottage of her own and a life separate from Koor. And Koor? Swimming in grain, he was, but he had flung out two sacks, like giving to beggars. And there was no one to stop him, to make him snatch that hateful hat off his head.

Roosi sobbed in a thin little voice and brushed the tears away with her brown grimy hands.

A pig came up to her from behind, gruntingly demanding attention. It pushed the milk pail with its snout and upset it. The water in the puddle became a turbid white. The pig started drinking from the puddle with a pleased grunt. Roosi shouted "Shoo!" but did not get up to drive it away.

A new thought flashed in her mind. Paul Runge! Hadn't he made her promise to come when she needed him? Now the time seemed to have come. Here was someone who could help her!

Roosi bestirred herself.

She found Paul Runge on the roof of his new cow house, covering it with yellow fir shingle, and thought in surprise and not without a tinge of envy: "He's reached the roof already!" As a matter of fact the cow house, occupying half the foundation space, already

stood under a roof. The other half had only the beams up for the future shed.

Paul regretfully laid aside the hammer and climbed down.

"What's the matter, are you ill?" he asked, looking closely at her swollen eyes.

No, she wasn't ill. But she happened to be passing that way and had decided to drop in for a talk, seeing that there was something to talk about.

"Go ahead," Paul said encouragingly. "By the way, when does Koor think of delivering his grain quota?" He refused to believe that Koor didn't have any.

"Grain?" said Roosi, her lips twisting in a bitter smile. She straightened the kerchief on her head, and conscious of a vicious pleasure in her words, she said: "He has enough grain to fill your room to the ceiling, and the kitchen too, and he'd still have a lot left over.... He'll rot the grain before he delivers it to the elevator."

"I see," said Paul, breaking a stick he held in his hands. "You're not joking, are you?"

She was just in the mood for joking! Roosi's tightened lips looked hurt. Didn't she know where he had it hidden in the ground?...

Paul said nothing for a minute and went on breaking the stick into small pieces. When she looked up with the intention of telling her story of the wrongs she had suffered, Paul's face was glowering.

"Do you believe in me, Roosi?" he demanded strangely, looking at her angrily.

Er-yes, she did.

Well, if she did, she was to do as he told her. It was very important. Today the people of Koordi would be able to see for themselves what kind of a man Koor was. And Roosi had to help in that.

"Help?" Roosi queried in a startled voice and almost regretted having spoken.

They would go up to the district centre. She would tell everything there was to tell. They would unmask that kulak. He, Paul, would harness the horse at once.

"Now?"

She suddenly felt elated and thrilled, as before taking a plunge into cold water. To see Koor at least once in his life frightened and cowering, without his hat on, robbed of his power, and she no longer hiding her trembling hands before him under her apron. What joy that would be! Then she suddenly remembered that she had not spoken about the main thing.

And she poured into Paul's ears in a tear-broken voice the hurried story of the red cow; it hadn't been much of a cow anyway when she got it from Koor—two of its teats were festering—and look at the animal now! She told of the mown vetch and of Koor's unspoken but threatened claim to a share of the oat and potato crops....

Paul nodded: just what he had expected, hadn't he predicted it? He didn't hear out all Roosi's complaints to the end—he got up, fretting at the delay and time wasted over all these needless and tiresome details.

"It all amounts to the same thing," he said, cutting her short impatiently, almost roughly. "Come along. I'll harness the horse."

"Will they leave me the cow?" she asked hopefully.

"They will," Paul promised her. "Only we must push off from the grain—that's the main thing, it's the crux of the matter..."

They rode out in the cart under a watery autumn sky. Antu was in the shafts, conscientious, placid Antu who with his master had lately become such a familiar sight to Koordi's farmers.

There was a fleeting instant, as the roofs of Karu farm sailed into view over the distant

hill crest, when Roosi seemed to see the figure of a man with a pale stark face gazing thoughtfully at her unharvested potato field. She caught her breath and quailed, but glancing at Paul's broad back and the hard lines of his profile—he was looking in the same direction—she felt reassured and even experienced a certain malicious glee: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it...."

Paul, apparently, had no suspicion of the emotional stress she was under. A man of action, though not devoid of a practical sober imagination, he could already picture to himself all the consequences this trip of theirs was going to have for Koor; he could see the rings spreading out from the stone which Roosi had thrown into the pool of life. A cluster of men in Koor's farmyard—representatives of the authorities, and he himself, Runge, and Roosi. Koor comes out onto the threshold sensing disaster.... An article in the county newspaper, perhaps even in the main newspapers of the Republic—Kulak Exposed.... The trial.... This would make many people in the district sit up.

"Paul, what happened to those bandits?" Roosi's voice suddenly brought him out of his abstraction.

"Kurvest? There's going to be a trial—they'll get what's coming to 'em," answered Paul. "Why do you ask?"

Roosi told him about that August night, the strange figure in the orchard, the beehive....

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if Kurvest got his supplies through the hive," Paul said after a pause. "It's quite possible...."

They rode on in silence for a kilometre or so until they reached the crossroads with the ruins of the ancient inn.

"Have you started building yet?" Paul asked.

Roosi sighed. Building indeed, when Koor....

"I haven't got any further than the foundation myself, even though I received timber and a cow," Paul complained. "Half my rye was burnt...."

This, as Roosi understood it, was also a hint at Koor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The trial of Mihkel Koor was held in the building of the executive committee of the district Soviet, the very same building that in the old days housed the district administrative office. In those days Koor mounted the steps with a swagger, never fearing that anyone might not bow to him. And he removed his cap at the proper time, as he reached the door, not like the poor peasants, who took off their caps long before they came to the porch steps.

Now, however, as he was led into the big room full of people, no one thought of greeting him, although the farmers from Koordi and the neighbouring villages had gathered there especially because of him. Nor could he screw up the courage to greet anyone, although he recognized many of those present.

The spacious room that ordinarily served as an educational centre and waiting room, and on special occasions as a campaign and meeting hall, was rather crowded and stuffy; all the benches and chairs were occupied. The only empty places were worn leather armchairs

that had just been brought in from Muuli's office for the members of the court.

There was another place, in a small, crude dock, that no one occupied. It was to this place that militiaman Arnold Luik significantly waved Mihkel Koor, and the latter obediently sat down. Arnold Luik, looking like a peasant dressed up as a militiaman, with his stringy neck and long, sunburnt hands sticking out of his short sleeves, took his place behind this dock and knit his brows importantly. There was a subdued murmur in the hall; out of respect for the court everyone spoke in an undertone, and when the men wanted to smoke they stepped out into the corridor.

Although the time was just past noon, it was somewhat dark in the hall. The month was November, the darkest period of the year, rainy, with no snow yet.

Mihkel Koor could make out only the first few rows clearly; the back ones merged into a single many-eyed face that was wary and hostile. But in the front rows he clearly discerned Johannes Vao's broad shoulders and Meisterson's long face with steel-framed spectacles glittering attentively on a tiny red nose that sniffed from a perpetual cold in the head.

When he had made them out Mihkel Koor

settled himself more comfortably and the hint of an odd smile touched his lean, taut cheeks. Staring straight at Vao and Meisterson he nodded to them; it was as though he nodded over all the heads, to spite that uniformed Arnold Luik.

Vao, who could not have given a clear account of his thoughts just then, was listening absently to the talk around him and looking at Koor's stark face, overgrown with an untidy bristle. Taken unawares by Koor's greeting, he nodded back, but rather strangely—as though shaking a fly off his forehead as much as returning a greeting—and then cast a sidelong look around to see if anyone had noticed.

Meisterson did not return the nod; he merely gave a louder sniff. To tell the truth, like Vao he did not feel any animosity toward Koor, nor did he understand quite clearly just why Koor had been placed in the dock—after all, he hadn't stolen anything or robbed anyone, but had only buried his own grain.... Why, that way they could put him, Meisterson, and Vao in the dock too: no matter how you put it, they did belong to the dozen or so middle farmers who had always followed the lead of such Koordi bigwigs as the Kurvests and the Koors.... But Meisterson was listening closely

to the buzz of voices behind him; as he saw it, the voices that stood out were clearly against Koor. Loudest of all were Taaksalu's arguments: "... If Koor's answering today, while he's at it he could answer for the three sacks of rye he didn't pay me. But if Koor had to answer for all his debts he wouldn't have any hair left on his head, or on his hide either, even though it's a wolf's hide...."

Taaksalu's discourse expressed most exactly, perhaps, the present general mood of the people, and since the general mood is an imperious, spontaneous force, Meisterson could not but yield to it. And so he did not reply to Koor's greeting, resolving to wait until he himself saw the whole thing clearly.

Someone tinkled a bell and the public straggled to its feet. The judge and the people's assessors entered from a side door.

Everyone in the hall knew the judge, who had come from the county centre. She was Maria Kask, once a farm labourer herself, a small, spare woman with grey eyes. In the Patriotic War she had fought the Germans, gun in hand, with the men of a destroyer battalion. Her wit had become a byword and many of her pointed sayings were making the rounds of the county.

When Paul Runge saw the county procurator, a youngish blond man with two decorations on his army tunic, he nodded his head in approval. He knew the procurator well—they had served in the same regiment. Koor would find it hard to wriggle out of it today....

The trial could now begin.

After all the due and customary formalities had been observed and the witnesses had left the hall the judge began in a low voice to read the indictment.

The hall grew quiet. Johannes Vao leaned forward, elbowing the man on his left, and became all ears. Many of the long and involved sentences were over his head, but what he did grasp amounted to the following: a certain Mihkel Koor, a farmer of the village of Koordi—Vao had known him well for years—was charged with having sabotaged the State grain deliveries. Koor owed grain to the State from the year before. Nor had he met his obligations for the current year, claiming a poor crop. All in all Koor owed the State about three tons of grain. Yet, as it had now become known, more than eleven tons of grain lay buried in a pit in his garden.

Eleven tons! Vao shook his head reproachfully. Well, one thing was clear—Koor had

only himself to blame for being in the dock. Out of those eleven tons he could certainly have given three to the State.... Yes, he could have; his son-in-law simply hadn't used his head....

The judge finished reading the indictment and then asked Koor whether he pleaded guilty to having wilfully failed to fulfill his obligations to the State.

Staring dully in front of him and gripping his crumpled hat tight, Koor said in a flat, wooden voice:

"I do not plead guilty of anything."

After conferring briefly the court, on the procurator's petition, decided to proceed to the examination of the accused.

The procurator rose.

"Tell us, to what use did you intend putting the grain in the pit? What were you saving it for?"

Koor thought a while. "For my own consumption," he replied with an indifferent shrug.

"For your own consumption? But look here —eleven tons until the next harvest makes a ton a month, or more than thirty kilograms a day. But there are only the two of you, correct?"

"Yes.... But there's the livestock, too."

"Well, all right—three cows, and some hogs. Is ten kilograms a day enough for them?"

"Certainly it's enough," spoke up a voice from the hall, and between his teeth Koor muttered:

"Perhaps it is enough."

"And what were you saving the rest of the grain for?"

Koor was silent.

"Grain is high this year," a resonant voice somewhere in the hall said softly but distinctly. Koor was not looking in that direction, but he could have recognized Taaksalu's voice out of a thousand.

"Just how much did you deliver to the State?" the procurator continued.

Koor gave him a hunted look.

"I don't remember," he muttered. "It says how much on the receipt."

"But still—a hundred kilograms, or was it more than that?"

"A hundred and eighty...."

There was laughter in the hall. Through it came the caustic voice of Mother Tilde, the one-cow woman:

"Why, I turned in more than that over the quota!"

The laughter grew. Even Johannes Vao joined in, grinning and shaking his head. Ah, that son-in-law of his had made a pretty spectacle of himself before everyone. Shame, shame! . . .

The judge raised her hand and the laughter died down.

"Just one more question," the procurator said drily. "In just what relationship does citizeness Roosi Rist stand to you?"

"She's a neighbour," answered Koor after a pause. "She has her own farm."

"Was it out of good-neighbourly feelings that you picked out your worst parcel of land to give her and promised to lend her seed?"

"Well—you see—she used to work for me."

"Used to? Or perhaps she continued to work for you right up until recently?"

"No," Koor said abruptly.

A slow flush spread over Johannes Vao's neck. Although everyone was absorbed in the duel between the procurator and Koor and nobody was paying any attention to Vao, he nevertheless felt as if he too were implicated in the case. How could he not be? Hadn't he taken an assiduous part in the establishment of Roosi's precarious farm? Could he declare that he had had no idea whatsoever of Koor's

intentions? Oh, son-in-law, son-in-law! . . . Like a vicious horse with bared teeth Koor had dashed along the brink of a dangerous precipice with himself, Vao, bouncing in the cart behind like a sack or a complacent sheep being taken to market with his legs tied, not seeing and not sensing that he was flying along the brink of ruin. Vao clasped his hands in his lap and stopped looking at Koor. He was now angry at Koor, as though the latter had in some way disappointed his expectations. Which expectations? That question was not so easy to answer.

After some thought the counsel for defence, a small, grey-haired man, polished his eyeglasses with his handkerchief and said:

"What prompted you to give citizeness Rist a cow?"

"I wanted to help her.... She's like one of the family...."

Again a buzz rose in the hall, but it died down at the judge's glance.

"Did you help her in any other way?" the counsel for defence asked.

"She often used my horse."

"Roosi used that horse to cart the harvest from her fields to Koor's barn," someone sitting behind Meisterson caustically remarked.

Meisterson reflected that the defence counsel was doing his client a poor service by asking such questions here, where Koor might be suspected of harbouring any feelings under the sun except sympathy for his farm hand Roosi.

The judge summoned the witnesses. Paul Runge was the first to enter. The procurator's eyes lit up as he surveyed Paul, as though the sight of this sturdy chap with the imperturbable face called up old and very friendly recollections.

Paul Runge was his usual brief and laconic self. What was there to say about Koor? He had been a kulak, and a kulak he remained. Of the ten farms under Runge's supervision as representative of the village Soviet, Koor's was the only one that had failed to meet its State grain delivery quota in full. Because of him the village had not fulfilled its quota of grain deliveries to the State. Because of him the efforts of the other farmers, who had hastened to deliver their first threshed grain to the State, had missed the mark. Eight times had he, Paul Runge, visited Koor and spoken to him. At first Koor had stubbornly refused to thresh his grain. When he finally did get the threshing done he had flatly refused to deliver his quota in full, pleading a poor crop. But

thanks to the efforts of his farm hand Roosi Rist his crop had turned out to be far from a poor one. Runge himself had helped to dig up the pit. There had been eleven tons of grain in it. That was all—the picture was clear....

Meisterson lowered his head and grunted. Yes, of course, the picture was clear: it was an underhand wolf's game, on the quiet, with no thought of either the honour of his neighbours or the interests of the village. Meisterson recalled that sunny day in August when he had grumblingly loaded his cart with threshed grain. It was a busy time, and he should have been carting manure out to the fields, but the people of Koordi were sacrificing their precious time to deliver the first share of the crop to the State. And once everybody else in Koordi had driven off to deliver his quota he did too—he wanted to be with the rest.

Roosi Rist stepped clumsily across the threshold and slowly made her way through the close rows. Her burning cheeks betrayed her agitation.

The faces of the judge and the assessors came to her as though through a fog; a gnawing feeling kept prompting her to glance to the side, and, twisting her neck awkwardly, she looked at Koor. He was staring straight at

her. His bristly cheeks and chin seemed to merge with the shadows of the dimly-lit room, as did the sunken eyes in their deep sockets, and there stood out only the waxy yellow of the cheekbones and of the bony forehead shining with sweat. Catching Roosi's glance, Koor suddenly bared his close-set horsy teeth in what appeared to be either a mocking grin or a grimace. Roosi hastily turned away, gripping the edge of the table tight to keep her fingers from trembling.

"Tell us what you know about this case," the judge said simply.

Roosi had a close glimpse of the woman's calm, attentive, somewhat tired eyes fixed on her.

"I—I don't know anything," she said dejectedly, aware of a cold sweat on her forehead and suddenly doubting with horror whether she, Roosi, could overcome her fear of Koor's blank, terrifying eyes no more than four or five feet away.

"Come now, you must know something," Judge Maria Kask said in an intimate tone, giving her a tender feminine smile. "You worked for him, you live on his farm, he helped you to set up a farm of your own—of course you know something."

"Who helped me? He?" Roosi exclaimed, opening her eyes wide. She pressed her hands to her breast and her face grew pale. "Koor helped me? The way he helped me I almost hanged myself...."

The silence behind Roosi was broken by a murmur of compassion.

And from that moment Roosi was carried away as though on wings. Everybody in the hall now heard in detail the sad story of how Koor had frustrated Roosi's hopes of an independent and well-to-do life, the story of the ill-starred cow, of the vetch that had been taken away from her, of the exorbitant prices for room rent, for grain, for seed....

She spoke five minutes, ten, fifteen, as though she were really talking for the first time in her life. Neither the judge nor the public interrupted, because everything she spoke about—the first strip of oats she had sown for herself on Koor's land, Koor's wheat that she had harvested, his cows and horses which she still tended, some barley Koor had failed to give her five years ago—all had profound meaning and pertained to the case in hand. And the more Roosi spoke the clearer it became to everyone in the hall that in reality the greater share of that colossal mound

of grain buried in the pit belonged not to Koor but to her, for it was she who had raised, harvested and threshed it. Although Roosi said nothing of the sort, this conclusion was clearly to be drawn from her words, and no one in the hall would probably have dared to deny it, neither Johannes Vao nor Meisterson nor any other of the Koordi folk.

The man sitting next to Meisterson stirred ponderously, like a bear, and wheezing, made cautiously for the exit. Johannes Vao could stand it no longer: he had a restless, disgusted feeling, and there was a bitter taste in his mouth, just as though he himself were on trial. He stepped out into the adjacent smoke-hazy room and greedily lit up.

"Is that everything?" the judge asked when Roosi had finished.

"Yes," said Roosi.

"How did you discover where your master had buried the grain?" the judge asked.

"I dug the pit for it myself. . . ." Roosi replied after a long pause.

"I see," said Judge Maria Kask. "What prompted you to help him?"

"He—ordered me to," Roosi mumbled in an anguished voice and fell silent.

"And you—" here the judge's voice suddenly took on a metallic ring, "and you believed that if you were submissive Koor would reduce your debt, would leave you the cow and the potatoes? Isn't that so? You hoped to make him lenient, didn't you?"

Roosi saw how large the eyes of this little woman had grown, and what pain had come into them—the old, half-forgotten pain of a former hired labourer. She was struck by the judge's insight, and lowering her head she said:

"Yes, I did."

"Well, and did that Koor order you to keep your mouth shut? Did he threaten you?"

Roosi nodded her head. "Yes.... He said he'd kill me...."

A silence fell over the hall. Then Koor's bench was clearly heard to squeak in the stillness. Straightening up and flinging out toward Roosi the hand in which he held his hat, crumpled into a ball, he shouted breathlessly in what sounded like a groan:

"And I should have!... I should have!"

"Sit down," the judge ordered curtly.

Looking at the judge's tight-set mouth, Roosi suddenly thought that everything people said about this woman's heroic past, about her

wartime deeds, was probably true from beginning to end.

But Koor dit not take his seat. His chest heaving, he shouted wildly:

"You're trying me? You're trying me for what's my own.... For my own grain!... Try them all in that case.... Here, try that fellow because he's got more grain than that Roosi!"

Koor viciously jabbed his hand toward the first row, intending to call out the name of Johannes Vao, but he suddenly fell into a stunned silence: Johannes Vao was not there. Koor's eyes met the cold, sobering gleam of Meisterson's spectacles. To a menacing undertone of voices from the hall he sat down and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

"Try whom?" the judge asked. She had regained her calm composure. "There's nothing to try them for. Today they're trying you."

The procurator put a question to Roosi:

"Tell us, was that a genuine threat, I mean to say, did you have reason to believe it would be carried out?"

And at this point Roosi told about that August night, the stranger in the garden, and her vague suspicions....

Again a deep hush descended over the hall, and a change seemed to have come into the precise and steady course of the trial within the tranquil walls of the hall where questions were being asked and answers given and the talk, at first glance, flowed along so peacefully, and Koor seemed to be sitting in the dock so tamed.... Many of the people in the courtroom got the feeling that by her story Roosi Rist had suddenly shifted the scene out into that field where inimical forces had clashed and the fire had raged, and Semidor, Maasalu and Taaksalu had sped through the dark autumn night to Runge's assistance, and all the people of Koordi had joined them....

After a brief adjournment during which the lamps were lit and the men filled the corridors and the neighbouring rooms thick with tobacco smoke, the public poured back into the hall and the trial was resumed.

Johannes Vao did not re-enter the hall. But neither was he able to leave altogether; he remained behind the door of the adjacent room, smoking, sitting down on the bench, standing up again, muttering under his breath.

When he came up close to the door he could hear snatches of the procurator's speech, which

gave a very clear-cut and logical picture of everything said and heard that day. Even without the procurator's words, though, much had become clear to Vao that day.

"... A sly and insidious kulak who amassed property by extensive use of hired labour. With regard to the Soviet State he is an enemy—an active enemy. As his method of fighting Soviet power he chose sabotage and intimidation of the poor.... He was evidently connected with bandit elements....

"In Koor's hands golden grain turned into gunpowder for bandits' bullets," Vao heard the procurator say. The procurator demanded a stern penalty for Koor.

And he, Vao, standing there with lowered head, could find no objections....

"A wolf," he muttered gloomily.

This was the beast of prey hated most by the peaceful farmers and stockbreeders of Koordi.

Vao went out into the darkness with bent shoulders, found his horse, straightened the harness and slowly set out for home

He was shaken to the depths.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was not until the first snowfall that Paul put his building tools away in the new shed. Now, at last, he could take a breath and stretch his legs under the table in the well-heated room.

He hadn't done so little either; he had even laid the foundation for the new house. Though a part of the grain had been destroyed by the fire they would have enough to keep them going till the next harvest, and of potatoes they had more than enough. There was plenty of pickled cucumbers and sauerkraut, a huge pitcher of syrup boiled from sweet white beet, and carrots and turnips enough for themselves and the farm animals. There was a new cow in the cattle shed in place of the one they had lost in the fire, besides two sucklings and a sheep. Several white hens and a cock on a perch imparted a certain cosiness to the cattle shed. And all this had been accomplished in a single year!

Come on then, Aino, add a bundle of juniper faggots to the stove—it crackles so merrily.

What's that cooking in the pot? You don't say —soup, and with dumplings? Why, we've even got meat too! Rake the fire up and let's wait for the new year. A year ago he had looked forward so eagerly to this peaceful and lazy hour in his own cosy home. It had seemed to him then that if that hour came life could stop. . . ."

> I long for life's hurry to cease,
> I'll live on in quiet and peace.

That hour had come, yet Paul's heart was ill at ease. . . . He sat with wrinkled brows, staring broodingly at the burning embers. His lips stirred from time to time as though he were conversing with an absent interlocutor, then he frowned again, annoyed with himself, worried.

Deep down, Aino laughed unfeelingly. She knew what it was all about. His present sufferings did not move her in the least, for they augured nothing ill or untoward as far as the home was concerned. On the contrary, they were rather connected with an honour rendered Paul by the village of Koordi. The fact of the matter was that Paul had to make a speech. And not just an ordinary speech urging the necessity of finishing the lumbering work on schedule or on some current event—Paul could

have managed that at a pinch, hard though it was—but this was quite an unusual speech. It was to be delivered before the people in support of the great village carpenter Johannes Uustalu whom the villagers of Koordi had nominated as their candidate to the supreme governing body of the Republic—not a simple speech at all.

"How would you say it if you had to?" Paul asked his wife in some embarrassment after a preliminary clearing of the throat.

"I wouldn't say it at all," Aino said smoothly.

"H'm.... Perhaps we oughtn't to elect him, eh?" Paul said, considering his wife with an amused twinkle.

"What do you mean?" Aino said in astonishment. "Who should be elected if not him? He was the first man to help you, and look at all those houses he built for people—that's what you should talk about."

"I think so too," Paul agreed.

Wherever he now went, whether it was the post office, the co-op store, the People's House or the railway station, the face of Johannes Uustalu looked out at him from election posters with mouth gravely compressed and left eye screwed up under an overhanging brow. It was

the same familiar squint with which the old man scrutinized a strip of wood in his hand before moulding it into shape. There was a poster on the door of the district Soviet building too, and thanks to a certain circumstance it told the old inhabitants of Koordi of events that had become history. On the wide porch of that building there still survived a rough bench, dark with age and seemingly made to last for eternity, on which Johannes Uustalu's father, Juri, was whipped by the soldiers of the punitive force. That had happened forty-odd years ago, when Juri together with other peasants had burned down the baronial grange. He was caught, and on the porch of the district administrative office received the vengeance of Baron von Ungern on his back. His son Johannes stood among the murmuring crowd.

"Must speak about the bench . . ." Paul now said to himself every time he stepped on the porch where the most important landmarks in the life of the great village carpenter were noted. His reflections on the amazing vicissitudes in the life of the people's candidate stirred in Paul thoughts about himself and about life in Koordi. In his mind's eye he saw Roosi, Semidor—their lives too had taken a remarkable turn—an amazing upswing, a triumph

over the past, over their very selves. He recalled Maasalu and Taaksalu, and cast a curious impartial eye at his own painful efforts. They were all inseparable from the destinies of Uustalu. And how many more lives, once so inconspicuous, were now springing into prominence in Koordi! It was a rallying of forces akin to the movement of thousands of spring rivulets converging toward a single channel. He wanted to tell of this in his speech but realized that it was beyond his power of expression.

Muuli, seeing the tortures he suffered, told him not to worry and gave him a piece of friendly advice—to read the speeches of other sponsors in the newspapers, then write an outline for his own speech and keep it before his eyes. He also suggested a few ideas. This advice, however, did not make things absolutely clear. The newspaper lines read so smoothly that Paul was painfully aware he would never be able to express himself that way. Besides, there were too many fine solemn words which neither the village carpenter Johannes Uustalu nor Paul Runge himself ever employed in their simple workaday lives. All the time he thought about his forthcoming speech only simple and ordinary things suggested themselves, such as

digging the well with Semidor; Uustalu, eye screwed up, planing a board; people of Koordi standing in a chain and saving the burning grain; he, Paul, riding with Roosi to the district centre to bring about Koor's downfall... This was what he wanted to talk about.

Though Paul constantly bore in mind the forthcoming meeting between the candidate and the electorate, the day of that meeting seemed to burst upon him unawares. Paul got busy betimes and was put out of humour by what were really unimportant trifles—the charwoman had not washed the floors the evening before, they had forgotten to provide an extra dozen benches, and it was suddenly discovered that the lamp chimneys were broken and useless and none were to be had in the local co-op store. A man had to be sent specially to town to get some. And the stoves in the corners of the big cold hall of the People's House were slow in warming up because the firewood was damp.

"Why didn't you tell me before? I would have brought some dry wood with me from home," he said with acid politeness to the manageress, an elderly woman who was hanging evergreen festoons about the walls.

"You'd better ask that Vao of yours," the manageress snapped back. "He's supposed to deliver us five cartloads and hasn't delivered one yet."

Paul swallowed the reproach in silence. As a matter of fact it was a long time since he had checked up how Vao was fulfilling the lumbering quota. This just showed you how the big things depended upon the little ones....

By evening, however, everything was in order. Two big oil lamps burned with a steady light, the stoves were scorching hot, and long benches had been borrowed from a place nearby. The table was covered with red bunting, and the large bouquets of pine needles imparted to it a festive air.

The people began to gather.... They walked in staidly, halted in the doorway and looked about, seeking acquaintances. Greetings flew across the hall:

"Hullo, Villu, how d'you do, old boy!"

"Ah... you're here with the family too— I thought I recognized the horse hitched outside the gates."

People enquired of each other:

"And where's Johannes-master himself?"

They stood in a crowd about the doorway to meet Johannes-master when he came in.

At last there arose an excited hum and commotion in the passage—Johannes had arrived. The old man came in, as always whimsical, very simple, nodding his grey cropped head from side to side. It was some time before he managed to reach the bunting-covered table. One had to shake hands, and exchange a few words here and there, for it was not every day that people got together in Koordi. He asked Paul about his wife, and shook his head deprecatingly when the latter explained that there was no one to leave the house with. . . .

It was only while seated at the table to the left of the comfortably ensconced Uustalu and seeing the chairman get up that Paul made an effort to recollect the opening sentence of his speech which he had drawn up with such difficulty. But it was too late—hearing his name called, he got up. He dare not look at all those faces right away—everywhere eyes and eyes—and his glance ran nervously over the rows seeking some face to light on, to enable him to collect his thoughts.

He found it. On one of the back benches, side by side with Kristjan Taaksalu, sat Roosi in a new flowery shawl. Her face, directed straight at him, expressed unshaken belief in

Paul's powers. The thought seemingly never entered her mind that Paul could be at a loss, timid.

"Men and women have gathered here today from the whole locality, from Koordi, Nurme and Madiste, and there are few among you who do not know Johannes Uustalu ..." he spoke into the hall in a quiet, friendly voice, his hands resting firmly on the table and his body leaning forward as though he invited all to a heart-to-heart talk. "He has built many houses in these parts.... The village school in Koordi was also built by him. I don't think there is anyone in this hall who would dare to say that those houses are poorly built. I remember, a long time ago, how he taught me to put up a log-frame, and for a mistake of one inch made me undo five tenons. Neither of us earned any money that day, but he told me then: 'If you go wrong in work, you'll go wrong in life, my boy.' And I am grateful to him for it, though I was offended at the time and secretly sent him to the devil...."

A ripple of amused sympathy ran through the hall. Uustalu chuckled and nodded his head approvingly.

"He is strict in work and strict in life," Paul pursued. "Many of you here have some-

times heard harsh words from him, but we take no offence at the truth. We also know that he can always be relied on for a piece of sound advice. Anyway, what's the use of talking? You all know Johannes Uustalu. He never doffed his cap before the shopkeepers and the grey barons. He saw his father whipped on the porch of the administrative office in nineteen five.... He didn't go to build barracks under the Germans though they threatened to arrest him. And who was the first man in the district of Madiste to deliver his grain to the State last autumn? Uustalu....

"And if you ask me, as man to man," Paul said weightily and impressively, "why I'm going to give my vote to Uustalu, I'll tell you in a few words—it is because he has always been on the side of the working people and is ready to serve them further...."

The back bench, on which Roosi and Kristjan sat, clapped. The applause was taken up in various parts of the hall. It was unexpected and somewhat disconcerting.

"This is a time of building," Paul went on. "We are building up Soviet life in all the districts of the Republic. That is why under our Soviet Government we cannot do without Uustalu the builder..."

Paul thought a second—"I believe I said the main thing?"—and while the applause thundered he sat down. He tried not to look into the hall, his cheeks flamed and he drew a breath of relief as a man does after acquitting himself with credit in a hard job.

Uustalu got up to tell the story of his life, which he need not have done since everyone in these parts knew it as well as he did himself.

Paul, not listening, glanced at the hall, where he could now distinctly make out every face in the compact rows, and felt sorry that Aino was not here and had not heard him speak. But someone had to stay at home to look after Crane farm....

CHAPTER TWENTY

A meeting of the Party organization of the district was on in Muuli's office, the windows of which overlooked the scraggly little snow-bound front-garden of district Soviet head-quarters. Fifteen men were gathered here, including Muuli. They were all comfortably seated on the threadbare sofa and a collection of unmatched armchairs—a legacy from the former district administration—and there was still room for another dozen people.

Few though they were, they were all men of mark—those who had the say in the important affairs of the district. There were several village Soviet representatives—men well on in years; the village smith Peeter—a short, narrow-chested man, quite unlike the popular conception of a smith, and the state purchases agent—a clean-shaven man with meticulously sharpened pencils of different colours ranged in the breast pocket of his neat jacket. There was also the chairman of the village Soviet, a stocky man with a high stubborn forehead, young Uusman, whose father had been killed

by the Germans during the occupation, and Artur Kohala, the head of the district agricultural department, in his grey suit and with spectacles on a lean stern face, resembling a village schoolteacher. There was one woman among them—Selma Karu, the manageress of the People's House. She sat nervously patting the kerchief on her head while her beautiful bright-blue eyes in a prematurely faded face travelled anxiously over the company.

Kaarel Maasalu, recently enrolled as candidate for Party membership, also attended the meeting.

Besides these, there was the executive committee chairman Janson and, of course, Muuli himself.

Young Uusman presided at the meeting. Janson made his report concerning the district's preparedness for spring sowing in 1947.

He was listened to in thoughtful silence; not because his report was a novelty—these people, standing closer than any others to the district's needs and requirements, knew the situation perfectly well themselves—but because they were trying to guess what drift the debate would take, whom it would affect.

The state purchases agent Moose was the calmest of them all. He sat toying uncon-

cernedly with a pencil, not expecting any sharp debate. He believed there was no ground for it, since the district that year showed a clean bill in its accounts with the State. This gave reason to believe that the coming year too would be nicely rounded off without any difficulties. He himself did not intend criticizing the report. After all, such questions as machine repairs and providing the district with fertilizer did not directly concern him.

The village Soviet representatives were less pacifically disposed. Bald little Kadakas from the village of Toola curled his lips and leaned over towards the red ear of the massive Huugo Murd, sitting bolt upright in his chair, and whispered something into it. Murd wiped his glasses with a snuff-coloured handkerchief and nodded assent. The village Soviet representatives considered that their chairman had bungled the job a bit in the matter of mineral fertilizer—the neighbouring district had received twenty tons more nitrates than they had.

Peeter, the village smith, was also preparing a pill for Janson. This was betrayed in the air of studied indifference with which he regarded the speaker, veiling his keen glance under a pair of red and puffy eyelids. When Janson mentioned the three new smithies that

had been opened in the district, Peeter clasped his huge pincerlike hands on his knees—these hands were quite out of keeping with Peeter's narrow shoulders, they seemed to belong to someone else—and smiled sardonically.

Kohala, the head of the agricultural department, was not quite at ease either. Janson said in his report that the agrarian reform had already been completed in the district and the deeds of perpetual tenure handed out to the farmers. Kohala knew that this was true in the main, but there were still some disputed fields and meadows hanging in the air, partly owing to the remissness of the agricultural department—in other words, through his, Kohala's, fault. There was another matter in which his actions might bear looking into—they were behind schedule in recording the farmers' seed stocks. Kohala stole glances at Muuli who, with one hand cupped over his eyes, was jotting down something in a notebook. Artur Kohala had no doubt that Muuli was making notes of everything with pedantic precision in preparation for the debate.

Neither did Selma Karu miss a single word of Janson's report. She listened to everything he said with equal interest, whether it was about fertilizer, the agrotechnical time sched-

ule, tractors, or harrow and plough repairs. Janson mentioned big figures—his estimates of fertilizer and the amount of seed that would be sown on the fields of Koordi ran into hundreds of tons. It all sounded so stupendous in comparison with the small scale of what she had recently begun managing—the cold little hall of the People's House temporarily located in an old brick barn, where there were so few books and still less placards. There weren't even chairs. The amateur theatrical group made up in a draughty little room adjoining the stage, seated on broken stools and blocks of wood. And Selma Karu was now thinking how she could multiply these meagre resources of hers in order to be of help in the prospective sowing campaign.

Janson finished his report, and young Uusman opened the discussion.

The smith Peeter took the floor first. He had a surprisingly resonant voice, and spoke mostly in questions, which, however, expressed clearly enough what he wanted to say.

"Is Comrade Janson sure that in the smithies he mentioned the charcoal burns in the forge the way it should burn in real smithies and that the work is going on without interruption? Is he sure that the smiths have

everything they need to carry on their work —iron and charcoal—and that they do nothing else but shoe horses and repair ploughs and carts? Has Comrade Janson helped to get any charcoal for Peeter's smithy? And horse-shoes?"

The village Soviet representative Murd, with a reproving flash of spectacles, sincerely doubted whether the executive committee of the district Soviet had done everything it should have done to provide the district with fertilizer for the spring. There was no reason for Janson to gloat over figures. If you examined closely you would find that not everything was as good as it looked. We got only superphosphates, whereas Madiste, the neighbouring district, had managed to get kainite and bone meal and saltpeter. The village cooperatives were stocked only with ploughs, and there weren't any seeders or cultivators—they had them in the town stores, didn't they? The executive committee might show an interest in these things and demand what the district needed.

Then Kaarel Maasalu spoke. The upshot of his laconic remark was that the success of the sowing preparations did not depend upon Peeter, however well his smithy worked, or upon Janson, even if he were an ideal administrator.

To make a real success of the 1947 spring sowing campaign they had to plough under all the fallow and reserve lands, and that could only be done by all the farmers of Koordi tackling the job together, jointly.

Muuli, who had been silent all the time, cleared his throat at this juncture and removed his hand from his eyes.

"It's coming," Kohala thought, glancing apprehensively in his direction.

Muuli, however, was neither irate, as he seldom was, nor brusque, as he sometimes was—rather was he his usual thoughtful, even-tempered self.

He, Muuli, would like to start what he had to say from where Comrade Maasalu had left off. The people of Koordi had to be rallied to the most important thing of all. The recent events in Koordi testified to an intensification of the class struggle. The poor were becoming more active, and in speaking of plans for the spring we should speak about conducting a correct class line in the district. There was Runge, now—he had exposed the kulak Koor. But Janson had once considered it necessary to help Koor out with fertilizer—because Koor was supposed to play first fiddle in State deliveries, wasn't that so? Didn't that teach us Party

men a lesson? Janson no doubt had the interests of the plan sincerely at heart, but the plan for Koordi was fulfilled only when the poor farmers, those who had exposed Koor, helped to fulfil it. Frankly speaking, in organizing the machine cooperative, too, in our haste we miscalculated. What actually happened? We simply gave Känd a lucrative job. That Känd was really just another kulak. What was the reason for these mistakes, Comrade Janson's, for instance? Just haste, haste and a too narrow practical attitude towards life.

Muuli paused, then concluded earnestly:

"We here, more than anyone else, are responsible for the future of Koordi and the education of its best people.... Those people are already discernible, they are coming to us...."

After this opening Muuli went on to criticize various points of Janson's report.

Muuli moved from the attic into a small cottage near the district Soviet headquarters. He planted cherry and apple saplings in the garden. Many concluded therefrom that he intended linking his life securely with Koordi and settling down for good. When a man planted an orchard that would yield fruit only after many years, it meant he was looking far

ahead, into the future—you could not call him a man here today and gone tomorrow, he wished to work in earnest. This found favour with many people.

Some eagerly sought his friendship. Muuli noticed this in the persistent invitations to weddings and village parties, where good care was taken that his wineglass should not be empty. He declined these invitations for the most part, albeit in a tactful manner. Yet you could not call him proud and haughty. He was a visitor at the poorest farms, and one Sunday he mowed the widow Konsing's meadow. Those who viewed him with a jaundiced eye —there were such people—interpreted all this as a bid for popularity on Muuli's part.

Muuli, truth to say, had in him a strong vein of fastidiousness in the making of acquaintances. Despite his seeming simplicity, considerable tact and sincere good will towards the inhabitants of those parts, he pursued an independent line of conduct. Attempts were sometimes made to break the ice by people who had been given the cold shoulder. When his wife, a small pale woman, leading her little girl by the hand, came to the farms with her shopping basket, the buxom farmers' wives would try to put a bag of white flour, a jar of

honey or a leg of mutton into it, but Muuli's wife would fling her hands up in dismay, and after a long inward debate, choose only what she could pay for out of a very slim and frayed old handbag.

The man was obviously bent upon preserving his absolute independence. And that even among the intimate circle of the executive committee staff, their wives and husbands. When the district State purchases agent Urvik, Moose's predecessor, had wanted to let Muuli have a practically new sofa at half its cost, the latter had praised the upholstery and the springs and even tried it out by lying down on it, but had not accepted the offer. He had bought an inferior one in the shop and paid more for it. Many people remembered this several months later, when Urvik was prosecuted for defalcations, and shook their heads knowingly.

When a man lives in view of a whole district, his every action naturally forms a topic of general discussion. As far as Muuli was concerned, it was held that there was more to his modesty than met the eye, that he was, in short, "preparing" for something. Someone set that rumour afoot in the district. What exactly he was preparing for was not clear —

that word might conceal a good deal. But that Muuli was preparing himself for something was pretty clear, and he must have felt sure of his position in Koordi, otherwise what would he be planting an orchard for? Why should he be taking such a keen and patient interest in scores of Koordi's affairs, from its preparedness for the spring sowing campaign to the brass trumpets which he went to such trouble to obtain for the People's House band?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Once more the spring waters broke into flood, and a blue-black starling, after a judicious inspection of the old birdhouse nailed to the ancient pine on the Vao farm, moved into it. The clear April light dispelled the gloom in the shed. Even from the window of the living room adjoining the kitchen one could now make out the farm implements stored there in the autumn—the plough, harrows, the cart. . . .

Now was the time for Johannes to get up and go out to the shed to see whether the iron parts had not got too rusty, to do some odd jobs at the carpenter's bench, to fix a new pair of wooden handles to the plough. But he sat impassively at his usual place by the window, under the dim looking glass, from behind which stuck out a dusty sheaf of papers and the covers of a twenty-year-old almanac published in the town of Tartu.

Johannes sat smoking and reading the newspapers, blind and deaf to the April light outside the window and to the starling busy putting its nest in order.

The clatter in the kitchen died down. Liina, her powerful arms akimbo, stood gazing at Johannes, then, no longer able to contain herself, said:

"The ice has probably started moving on the river. You might go down with the fish spear instead of just sitting around...."

Liina knew his weak spot, but Johannes, keen angler and hunter though he was at heart, now merely shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

Then Liina recalled that the cart had been creaking last autumn when he put it in the shed. The creaking had undoubtedly not passed during the winter—he might see to it....

Johannes paid no attention.

The sun at noon burst full into the narrow window, there was no avoiding it. Johannes squinted in its glare, and everything dazzled his eyes; even the printed letters seemed to jump out of their lines and flit before him like a swarm of midges in spring. And there was that saucy restless starling darting continuously back and forth between the garden and its nest.

The chair began to creak under Johannes. He fidgeted, transferred his weight from one side to the other, peered under the table with

a thoughtful expression on his face, then bent still lower and tried to see under the bed at the far end of the room.

"What on earth have you done with my boots?" his deep voice rumbled.

Liina gave Johannes his boots, thickly smeared with lard.

Several days went by. Johannes brought home a small pike he had speared in the river. He could now be seen hammering away in the shed. Though his every movement betrayed a dogged apathy to what he was doing, he hammered away nevertheless.

Liina was sceptical about this indifference of his. She considered it merely pretence on his part, the latest whim of his wounded vanity. It even crossed her mind that his thoughts had never worked so intensely, never been so deeply engrossed in what was going on around him as they were now. He had never before pored so persistently over the newspapers or been so wrapped in thought. Even in the middle of the night he would knock out and fill his pipe, cogitating all the time.

Johannes was upset. Life in Koordi had always seemed to him changeless, simple and comprehensible, something like his own farmyard, where all the necessary fixtures of life

had been planned and set out ages ago by his grandfather and great-grandfather. Johannes had gone through that life with the dignity and assurance of a rural patriarch who was as much at home in Koordi and among its people as he was in his own farmyard.

Now life was taking another tack, showing new and unfamiliar angles. What had once been a force was now losing ground, was being pulled up by the roots, was falling into decay. At the same time, the seeds that had been cast into the seemingly barren soil of Crane farm had sprouted and shot up. Suddenly his son-in-law Mihkel Koor had been wrenched from his nest like a decayed tooth. Mihkel Koor, who with his numerous business connections and ties of blood, seemed to have built his life in Koordi on a rock! Were there many in Koordi who could say they owed Koor nothing, not even three or four days' labour in payment for the use of his reaping machine or seeder? There were few such people.

The qualities by which Koor had risen in the world—cunning, shiftiness and wolfish rapacity—now seemed to have lost their force altogether in the conflict with that timid lamb Roosi. On the other hand there was his other son-in-law rising in the world, becoming in a

short time a public figure in the district, a man of mark whom everybody looked up to. Vao's influence and popularity had suffered and were obviously on the wane since this unwanted son-in-law of his had come to the fore. Johannes was forced to admit it. Lately the farmers had made no bones about criticizing the machine cooperative in his presence, plainly hinting at his, Vao's, inactivity.

"Yes," Johannes reflected, "that lad from Crane farm has been carried out to midstream, while Koor has been swept to the bank like a splinter of driftwood, yes, and drawn down into the whirlpool. . . ."

But what was he, Johannes, to do?—that was the question.

Johannes had lately acquired the habit of irritably waving his hand in conversation and saying:

"Oh, what's it to me!"

However hard Johannes tried to shake off these disturbing thoughts, he succeeded but poorly. He could, at home, shake off his wife Liina, or, beguiling the evening with a neighbour, say scornfully: "Oh, what's it to me . . ." but he couldn't shake off the whole of Koordi, however much he might wish to. He was too deeply rooted in Koordi. One could not imagine

the village without the Vao farm, as one could not imagine the farm without the ancient and sturdy pine tree that grew on it.

The first man to set up his own farm in Koordi, after all, had been Taavet Vao, whose name was a sort of legend in the countryside. It was he who had been the first to buy his freedom from the baron and stub a field to plant rye. It was he who was said to have been able to lift a yearling bull onto his shoulders, and who turned up the soil with a wooden plough made out of a tree root. It was he who had made a cart in which there was not a single iron nail, not a single metal part. Since then four generations of Vaos had lived in Koordi, clinging tenaciously to the soil. The tenacity and persistence of the Vaos excited the respect of their neighbours, among whom there existed a long-standing and unshaken belief in the stability of that family.

It is quite possible that it was a wish to give stability to the new machine cooperative that had impelled the farmers of Koordi to entrust control over it to none other than Johannes Vao.

The wished-for stability in this new enterprise was not achieved however. Men had expected him to get things running smoothly,

but how was he to do that when everything had become so confused in his own life and he was unable to make head or tail of it himself. To attempt it would have meant abandoning caution and his reluctance to fall out with the rich farmers.

In general, his membership on the board of the cooperative was beginning to worry him. He felt that things had taken such a turn there that either he must give up his attitude of easy-going forebearance, or else try to wash his hands of this irksome and nerve-racking affair. The way that fellow Känd clung to that rickety tractor of his and wouldn't for the life of him let it slip out of his control. Johannes, in his heart of hearts, at least understood him, if he did not actually sympathize with him, and that to a certain extent prevented him from making a stand against Känd. But there was something else which Johannes Vao was decidedly beginning to dislike. In the first place, he was not certain the cooperative possessed an official paper to the effect that it had taken over the tractor from Känd. This suspicion had arisen in Johannes' mind only recently. If such a paper was lacking, that meant Känd could pick up and leave on his tractor one fine day and you couldn't get anything out of him....

Once, while inspecting the tractors in the shed, Johannes had gruffly remarked to Känd that it seemed to him some of the working parts from the other, commonly-owned tractor, which the cooperative had recently bought, had found their way to Känd's tractor. He looked at Känd significantly when he said this.

"What of it?" Känd said in surprise, staring at Johannes with his light eyes. "One good tractor is better than two bad ones."

Vao logically observed that two good tractors nevertheless were better than one, and that as things stood the second tractor might not come out at ploughing time. Besides, the farmers were remarking on the fact that Känd's former tractor was being put in shape while the other was falling to pieces.

"Tut, tut, Papi Vao!" Juhan Känd exclaimed, looking straight into Johannes' face. "It used to be mine, now it's the community's. Today the plough on the farm is yours, and tomorrow it'll be in the common shed, the kolkhoz shed."

Was the man poking fun at him? Johannes chewed a straw, trying to collect his thoughts, then, feeling a bitter taste in his mouth, he spat.

His name was on the auditing commission list too. Damn it all, he wouldn't stand for. . . .

The end of Johannes' sentence was drowned in a deep-throated unintelligible muttering.

Känd indulgently shrugged his shoulders and gave a bland smile. Johannes Vao went out feeling like a fisherman who had aimed his spear at the slippery back of a pike and missed it. The fish had darted aside with a mere flick of its tail.

There was a moment when Johannes felt like dismissing this matter, too, with a gesture of annoyance: "Oh, clear the mess up yourselves...." But no, he couldn't do that—and the talk with Känd remained an unsolved problem preying on his mind.

After the previous year's fire, relations between the inhabitants of Crane farm and the Vaos adjusted themselves as a matter of course, without any explanations or mutual reproaches. Paul and Aino alternately dropped in at the Vao farm, and Johannes and Liina paid a visit to Crane farm bearing belated congratulations.

Johannes plied his son-in-law with a choice brand of home-grown tobacco. Conversations arose—those guarded talks punctuated by pauses and reticences usual between men who are trying to sound each other out. They talked of distant towns and Republics, and events

of international politics. All the time, however, their minds were on the destiny of Koordi's land and people; the undercurrent of all the talk was an unexpressed interest in and anxiety for their own near future.

Those distant towns, factories where cast iron flowed like water, mines where coal was produced, coal which not even the village smithy could do without—these were all things which Johannes visualized rather dimly. But when it came to the cultivation of rye and wheat in Koordi, here he felt at home. He could tell you in detail, giving exact dates, when and what grades of wheat were cultivated in these parts and by whom, and what yields were obtained. Here Johannes verged on the loquacious, and smoothed his moustache with the dignity of a man who knows his worth.

Once, while telling about the failure that had attended Priidu Murumets' efforts to grow potatoes on a patch of drained swamp, Johannes suddenly broke off, and after a pause he asked with seeming irrelevance:

"Well, when are you going to start a kolkhoz?"

"It's for the community to say . . ." Paul answered vaguely. The question did not sur-

prise him—he had been hearing it frequently of late.

Johannes peered searchingly from under projecting brows at his son-in-law's grave face and thought suspiciously: "He knows, but doesn't want to say...." There were rumours that politically active villagers were taking stock of lands and farms—taking thorough stock, too. He would very much like to know what place the Vao's fields had in his son-in-law's plans. Because whichever way that future, unknown plan was figured out, Vao's eight hectares of level fields lying compactly in the heart of Koordi would certainly drop into it. And tractor drivers from the suburban machine and tractor station, men he did not know, would plough them instead of Vao's two mares who were trained to a straight furrow. Johannes himself would perhaps have to sow not on his own strips, the length and breadth of which he had paced for more years than he could remember, but where the team leader placed him, perhaps on Priidu Murumets' wedge of land adjoining the swamp, where nothing had ever grown well and where it was disgusting for a farmer like Vao to sow....

All the horses would be mixed together in the common stables, the same as the different

harnesses and saddles in the shed. Meisterson's fine new seeder would be mixed together with Priidu's antediluvian mower, and Vao's field bounds with those of Tatrik, and you would never know which was yours! All the familiar boundaries between which life had flowed would be wiped away.

Outside the window Johannes could see Liina coming to the house from the cattle shed carrying a milk pail. In the course of generations the path to the cattle shed that Liina trod many times a day year in and year out, and before her Johannes' mother and the other women of the Vao clan, had become tight-packed and hard as the floor of the threshing-barn, and no grass ever grew on it. Could it be that the bustling Vao yard, so noisy of an evening when the cows came home from pasture and the stupid, timid sheep crowded behind them and the fat hogs veered aside at the shaggy Barbu's low-pitched bark, would soon fall silent? Could it be that the heavy tread of the powerful horses, the pride and beauty of the farm, would never again be heard beneath the roof of the stable?

Johannes' heart contracted piteously with an unfamiliar womanish sort of twinge. Although he tried to preserve his dignity, anguish crept into his voice as he said:

"It's hard to transplant an old oak—the roots have to be chopped.... It won't take...."

"Oh, it will," Paul said after a pause. "Building a new life in an old cot is harder." There was a note of irritation in his voice. "You paper the walls, but the stove smokes and makes them all sooty again.... The new life won't put up with old walls...."

They both fell silent.

"The new life—it follows a new law...." Paul clung to his idea as stubbornly and unyieldingly as he grasped the crowbar when he circled a boulder out in the field, sizing up how to tackle it. "And the new law is like fire: Koor singed his claws in it, but I'm warm and comfortable beside it. Figure that out."

"Oh, that Koor's a wolf."

"He's a wolf, all right, but there were some who trailed after him," Paul said bluntly.

Johannes Vao gave a wheeze and began to fill his pipe.

Paul meditatively watched the fiery eye in Johannes Vao's massive pipe flare up and wink.

"I'm not Koor but I also want to live well," he said gaily. "After all, why shouldn't I want to?"

Johannes looked at his son-in-law in surprise. He did not understand his playful tone. What was coming over Runge?

"You steering toward the collective farm?" he wanted to ask, but he held his tongue.

As though he had read Johannes' thoughts Paul suddenly said in a very friendly and confidential voice:

"Just the same, your road leads to our farmyard—that's what I think.... Where else is there to go? Life is changing. You can't live alone, to no purpose, like your forefathers—the times are different. Who's going to help you? Roosi won't go to work for you, she has her own land. The fields need fertilizer and machines. But we'll have all that only on one condition—if we unite."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ants Muuli was awakened early by sunlight flooding the room.

Stretching so that his joints crackled, he sprang up and in one minute tidied the narrow and rather hard wooden bed, the crude and clumsy creation of an unknown village carpenter. The carpenter's chief purpose had been to produce a utilitarian article that would last for years; only that type of article had any demand among the Koordi peasants.

On his bare feet Muuli strode softly and silently across the room where his daughter was sleeping, her flaxen curls spread out over the pillow, and pulled an unbleached linen towel from the nail. After glancing into the kitchen, where his wife was busy, he went out into the yard.

It had evidently rained just before dawn, a warm June rain. Raindrops trembled like undried tears of joy on the luxuriant white flowers of the lilac bushes growing along the fence, and sparkled in the fresh green grass.

While Muuli slept the earthworms, those noble toilers, had been at work enriching the earth. The level, hard-packed yard was all covered with the tiny moist mounds they had deposited. When, of a warm sunny morning, old folks saw the ground covered with such protuberances they said the soil was blossoming.

Muuli pumped up water from the well into a white enamelled basin; with relish he worked up a lather on his hands and face and rinsed off with cold water. He rubbed his face and neck with the linen towel until the skin glowed. The basin of soapy water he carried to the hillock beyond the stone orchard wall where the pumpkins lifted their pulpy, umbrellalike leaves to the sun. He carefully poured the water on the pumpkins, to the last drop. Soapy water was good for plants....

Straightening up, Muuli cast a leisurely glance about him with the eye of a husbandman. On the other side of the low wall grew his orchard; the young trees set out the previous year had taken good root; their branches were covered with rich green leaves. Beyond the orchard and the yard stretched the farmers' fields of rye, wheat and barley. Muuli's keen glance noted the miraculous

change the night's rain had worked in the fields, how the wheat had freshened and become lustrous. The full, sharp-leaved tops of the stalks were bursting and putting forth the first ears.

The wheat was earing!

Muuli nodded his head in approval and smiled broadly.

Anyone seeing the Party organizer now would have realized how much in him there was of the most ordinary Koordi grain farmer, who could not but rejoice at the significance of the refreshing rain that had fallen on the fields the night before.

By the age of forty-five Muuli, once a shepherd and farm labourer, had come to know various kinds of work in the village and later on in town, and also the soldier's work in war. But the one kind of work that deep in his heart he considered the noblest of all was that of growing grain!

After breakfast Muuli sat down before the open window at a plain desk neatly covered with cardboard and opened the newspaper at a difficult theoretical article which he had failed to read the day before. He read slowly, now making notes in a thick notebook, now consulting a dictionary. Every once in a while

he rose from the desk and strode up and down the room, softly humming some simple tune and vigorously rubbing his broad clean-shaven chin.

The quiet morning hours Muuli devoted to reading; then no one disturbed him and his head was especially clear. During these hours he drew up the outlines of his speeches and lectures for the district's Party members, rural activists and the village intelligentsia.

At such times he frowned on any invasion of his room; listening to the muffled steps behind the closed door his seven-year-old daughter Maimu would say sternly to her shabby Teddy bear, mimicking her father:

"Sh-h.... Now please stop acting naughty."

When the hands of Muuli's wrist watch pointed to a quarter to nine he put on his jacket and hat, mounted his old bicycle and set out for the district Soviet building. It was not a long ride—only about a kilometre along the smooth gravel highway.

As he wheeled the bicycle up to the porch Muuli recognized Mother Tilde sitting there. Mother Tilde's farm was probably the poorest in Koordi. She lived there alone with her grandchildren, whom she was bringing up; they were the children of her son Arnold, a

Soviet soldier who fell in action on Saaremaa. Island during an attack to drive the Hitlerites off the narrow Cape Sõrve.

Usually very talkative and energetic, today Mother Tilde sat in a pose of patient waiting on a bench in the shade, her thin gnarled hands clasped in her lap. It seemed to Muuli that her answer to his greeting when he lifted his hat was none too amiable.

"What's brought you here so early?" he asked as he stepped up onto the porch. Now he recalled that lately he had been running into Tilde rather often at the district executive committee.

"Those who are thirsty have legs," Tilde replied, and compressed her lips.

"Whom do you want to see—Chairman Janson?" Muuli asked genially. He slowly sat down on the bench beside her.

"I don't need Janson, I need a seal, a rubber stamp on a paper," Mother Tilde explained, throwing a sidelong glance at Muuli.

Then Muuli heard the following story: it seemed Tilde had saved some money—there was the pension from the State for Arnold's orphans, and besides, she did not sit around with her hands folded, she worked. And now, casting an eye about her home, she had found

it wouldn't be a bad idea to have the stove and chimney reset, since bricks had begun falling out, the walls whitewashed and a few new windowpanes put in. Some bricks she needed, and glass and lime.... And since building materials were shortage items her application had to be stamped....

"What does Janson say?" Muuli enquired.

"Janson?"

She had come to see him two weeks ago but that had not been one of his reception days. On the day he did receive, Comrade Janson had not had time to see her—he had been settling highly important matters of some kind or other. How he had shouted into the telephone and railed! And when Tilde mustered her courage and entered his office Janson had just waved her away with: "Tomorrow, tomorrow...." But the next day Janson had not accepted her application because it was written in pencil instead of ink. "Come the day after tomorrow," he said. But that day Janson had made a trip to town on administrative business. And so today Tilde had arrived early in the morning so as not to miss Janson, although perhaps he might not like that.... Would he be in today?

Muuli looked at his watch.

"He's late but he'll come.... He'll come without fail."

"Besides, I talked to him about brushwood," Tilde went on, stimulated by Muuli's attention. "I haven't any firewood. If I bring a request with the district executive committee stamp on it the Forestry Bureau will give me brushwood, or even logs...."

As he listened to Mother Tilde Muuli studied her thin arms and blue-veined bare feet burned a deep brown by the sun. Those bunched and swollen veins bore mute testimony to the back-breaking work Tilde had performed all her life in Koordi.

Muuli suddenly had a clear picture of how today too, if for some reason Mother Tilde did not wait to see Janson, she would trudge back home in the sun on her weary legs—she had all of five kilometres to go! On the way she would meet women acquaintances, perhaps old Meeta Taaksalu going to the shop for some yeast, or Johannes Vao's wife Liina delivering cans of milk to the creamery. And, leaning on the side of Liina Vao's cart with her thin, work-worn hand, her mouth set in a grim line, Mother Tilde would tell about the brushwood and the bricks.... And those she met would tell dozens of others that Janson had grudged

Mother Tilde some brushwood, had been in too much of a hurry to hear her out properly, had not understood. . . .

Flattered by the attention of this grave man Mother Tilde was prepared to talk on, but all of a sudden Muuli rose abruptly to his feet and clapped on his hat.

"Don't you go away," he said peremptorily. "Janson will be here right away—I know it."

And, springing onto his bicycle, he rode out to the highway.

In Janson's yard nets with strands of waterweed clinging to them stood against the wall of the shed. Noticing a dead frog with a torn skin in the net, Muuli reflected that Janson had probably returned late from crayfishing, his favourite pastime.

In the storm passageway he saw two towheaded youngsters, Janson's sons, bent over a tall wicker basket; a steady rustling and stirring came from under the cover of burdock leaves.

Muuli walked straight in, forgetting about knocking.

Janson was eating fried eggs with cracklings; a drop of fat dripped from his chin.

"You're late, my friend," said Muuli. His voice carried an unfathomable ring.

"What, a phone call from the county? The report?" Janson exclaimed anxiously, pushing back the frying pan.

"No, Mother Tilde's come; you see, she needs a rubber stamp," replied Muuli in the same unfathomable voice.

"Tilde?" Janson did not catch his meaning. "Ah—about that brushwood.... She's bothered the life out of me with her brushwood, the old pest...."

Janson looked hurt. He glanced regretfully at the frying pan he had pushed back, poured himself a glass of milk and set the pitcher in front of Muuli.

"Help yourself."

"Thanks, I've already eaten," Muuli replied drily. "I'll wait."

"I'll be ready in a second," Janson said hurriedly.

Muuli suddenly gave a mirthless chuckle.

"What's the matter?" Janson asked, surprised.

"You see, to tell the truth Mother Tilde doesn't need you, she needs your rubber stamp.... That's what she said: 'I don't need Janson, I need a rubber stamp....' You don't seem to have won Tilde's favour. That's bad, my friend."

"As if all I had to do was keep Tilde supplied with brushwood," Janson muttered, irritated by Muuli's ironic tone. "Here the county authorities are on my neck; my head's in a whirl trying to figure out how to get the road repairs done on time. Forty wagons are supposed to be out today carting road metal, but the farmers aren't in any hurry—there's plenty of time, they think...."

"Cheap talk," Muuli interrupted, shrugging his shoulders. "If you're in no hurry to settle a matter like Mother Tilde's naturally the farmers are taking their time too. Have you looked into her matter? Do you think the farmers don't see that? There, they'll say, Janson grudges Tilde a bit of brushwood, and her son fought for Soviet power. Call that a trifle? How could you?..."

Muuli rose, and looking with disgust at the drop of fat on Janson's chin, said very softly but distinctly:

"If this matter concerned only Janson, then to the devil with it—it wouldn't be so bad. But Janson is chairman of the district executive committee, and he hasn't got that into his head yet.... That's where the trouble lies. Mend your ways, Janson!"

Janson was stupefied. This was the first time he had seen the even-tempered Muuli in such a rage. He hastily wiped his face with a towel, snatched his cap from the peg and followed Muuli out.

They mounted their bicycles and set out for the district executive committee building, Muuli in front and Janson close behind.

They rode in silence.

Janson was silent because he was hurt. He and Muuli had had arguments before; at times he had had to listen to rather unpleasant things from the Party organizer, but it had always been couched in a restrained and inoffensive form, and always apropos of "large-scale" matters, as Janson proudly called them. For instance, when important affairs and plans affecting the whole district of Koordi were discussed. And now all of a sudden Muuli had lost his temper on account of Mother Tilde!... As if it mattered so very much whether Tilde got her brushwood a week earlier or later.... After all, there were lots of farms in Koordi, hundreds of people—and Janson couldn't be expected to please all of them. If some other activists of the district were in his place he probably wouldn't like it, he'd whine. It was responsible work, sometimes even the nights

weren't long enough to get it done; and when big and important campaigns were on there were times when he didn't come home three nights running. No, if anyone else were in Janson's shoes....

A feeling akin to self-pity swept over Janson. He glowered at Muuli's firm, stubborn neck and gave a loud sigh.

"It would be nice to lead a quiet and peaceful life on my own farm," Janson's thoughts ran on. "Play the bass horn in the local brass band, make a speech once in a while at a sports meet or at the voluntary firemen's association gatherings (Janson shone as an orator and loved to make speeches) and everything would be nice and calm.... Ah, what a pity I didn't make a stand, didn't say no when I was nominated for this job!"

At the same time Janson felt it would be a wrench to give up his new position. Not so long ago people had simply called him Jaan, somewhat condescendingly, even if amiably enough, and now he was one of the biggest men in the district and everyone called him Comrade Janson. He had an office of his own with a telephone on the desk, and he carried a rubber stamp in his pocket, and a secretary brought him papers to sign. Once upon a time

many in the district had been able to show their superiority and power over him, but now he could pick up the telephone and summon the chairman of any village Soviet or any village Soviet representative and talk to him like a superior. He was the power!

Muuli was silent too. He was also thinking about Janson; he wasn't sorry he had flared out at him. Maybe what he had said would do Janson some good. The man ought to be stirred up, given a jolt; mentally he was running to fat, starting to fade before he had blossomed out!

Muuli was thinking that Janson, who came from a rather poor family, a new settler himself, who had risen from among the activists of the district, did not yet understand the demands of his new position. This man—when you came right down to it, not a bad fellow at all—proved to have weaknesses hitherto unnoticed; and it seemed as though many people in Koordi had noted his vulnerable spots. That might lead to danger not only for Janson. There were some things, for instance, that Muuli did not like one bit. Janson had got on his feet faster than any of the other new settlers in the district, although he himself did little work on his land. Kulaks were cultivating

Janson's land for him, and lending him seed—such were the rumours that had come to Muuli. Muuli had once asked Janson if this were true.

"But they're kulaks!" Janson had exclaimed in surprised innocence. "Let them work a little for their old-time farm hand. If you want to know, they're paying back old debts...."

And Janson had burst out laughing. The idea seemed to tickle his fancy.

As they wheeled their bicycles up to the wall they saw others parked there. Mother Tilde was not the only one waiting to see Janson. Several farmers came forward to meet him, Juhan Känd in the lead. Smiling a broad, good-natured smile, Känd greeted Janson like an equal and, shouldering aside another man, strode along beside him.

Janson frowned and said in a stentorian voice, so that everyone should hear:

"Mother Tilde has a matter to discuss with me too.... This way, please."

And he made a gesture of invitation to the astonished old woman, glancing at the same time in Muuli's direction. The gesture was at once an offer to make up with Muuli, and even an apology....

Muuli did not indicate in any way that he had noticed the gesture. His look was one of worried preoccupation.

Muuli had received several visitors and discussed the next month's program of the People's House in detail with Selma Karu when there was a knock at the door and Semidor entered.

Muuli rose to greet him. They shook hands and began to speak about the weather. Not that they had nothing else to talk about. No, they were busy men, and they started their conversation with the main topic: to them the weather meant the harvest. They were pleased with the weather.

A twinkle came into Muuli's eyes as he surveyed Semidor—in honour of his visit to the district executive committee the latter wore his new grey suit of good quality but somewhat coarse woollen cloth. The suit was made by the village tailor, whom Semidor had paid off in potatoes and a pickle barrel; Semidor was by way of being a cooper too.

Muuli had regained his sunny mood of the morning. He rose and walked the length of the room.

"Martin," he said, addressing Semidor by

his first name, something he rarely did in official talks. "Martin, you have a long and happy journey before you!"

Semidor blinked his white eyelashes and grinned uncertainly. He did not quite understand. What had made this clearheaded businesslike man turn allegorical all of a sudden? Semidor could not conceive that the words were meant to be taken literally. Just what kind of journey faced him?

"I made some distant voyages when I was a sailor . . ." he began cautiously, playing for time in which to ponder on Muuli's words. "But I don't recall that they were happy ones. Once on that old tub the *Põhjala*," he went on, warming up to his topic, "we got as far as Copenhagen. Our engine broke down out at sea that time. . . ."

Muuli broke into a hearty laugh. "No, that's not what I meant at all. You guessed wrong."

Turning serious, he said impressively:

"It's a long journey; you'll go through Leningrad, Semidor, and you'll see Moscow!"

Semidor was astonished beyond words. "Me?"

He buttoned his jacket, then unbuttoned it and wiped his bald crown with a crumpled checkered handkerchief—he felt hot.

He, Semidor, suddenly going to Moscow! Going to that eternally bustling Moscow whose vitalizing breath was felt even here a thousand miles away, awakening ever new thoughts, desires and aspirations in the dwellers of the remotest woodland farmsteads in quiet Koordi. Semidor reflected that finding himself in bustling Moscow dressed in his country boots and hat would probably be just as strange as braving the ocean in a frail rowboat.... What if they jostled the life out of him there? Muscovites, though, were said to be hospitable folk.

"You'll travel down to the Black Sea," said Muuli. "In Abkhazia you'll visit an Estonian kolkhoz named after Comrade Stalin—a rich farm it is. You'll look over some Russian and Ukrainian kolkhozes. They have a wealth of experience, my friend, yes...."

Semidor understood from Muuli's words that he was being included in the excursion group of Estonian peasants who were setting out to acquaint themselves with the achievements of collective farms in the fraternal Republics. Leningrad, Moscow, Georgia!

"You're not going on a junket," Muuli went on slowly and thoughtfully, fixing a narrowed gaze on the big wall map of the Soviet Union, as though mentally following and appraising

Semidor's journey. "I don't think it would be worth while taking you away from your work just for the sake of a pleasure trip. Don't you agree?"

Semidor gave a cough and nodded. Wrinkling his forehead, he concentrated.

"The kolkhoz people will tell you all about their work and their life. You have to go into it thoroughly, Semidor. Don't walk around like a tourist; pay less attention to the welcoming speeches. Ask for the workday unit records and study them. Ask about everything you see. Look into the barns, inspect the fields.... See how everything is run. Here's a notebook, write everything down so you'll be able to tell us all about it afterwards. You're not going just to have a good time, Semidor, you're going—"

"To learn," Semidor said.

Muuli sat deep in thought. He was silent a long time. Semidor ought now to get up and go, but he did not. He felt, as did Muuli himself, that something had been left unsaid, but that it would be said.

"Why, of course, yes ..." said Semidor. "But I want to ask you a question, Comrade Muuli."

Muuli gave a friendly nod. "Yes?"

"We're going to have a kolkhoz in Koordi too, aren't we?"

"That depends on us," Muuli said gravely, "on the people."

"We will," Semidor said confidently. "We'll have one soon."

"Why do you think so?" Muuli asked, curious.

"The people are feeling out the road," Semidor said simply. "There's us at Jaagu farm, and Paul Runge and—why, there's lots of us all over Koordi.... After all, we know the road's been opened up a long time ago!" Semidor pointed to the map of the Soviet Union and triumphantly cast a sidelong glance, full of peasant cunning, at Muuli, proudly confident that he had grasped the Party organizer's innermost thoughts.

"Yes, that's what we're talking about, that road," said Muuli with feeling.

For a long time the Party organizer sat over his papers, tapping his pencil absently and staring straight in front of him, his thoughts on Semidor.

He recalled the discussion—it had turned into a rather heated discussion at that—when they had been choosing the man from the

district for the excursion group. Some of the leading men of the district had insisted on appointing one of the more efficient, solid farmers, for instance, Runge or Maasalu, or even Johannes Vao. But Muuli had insisted on Semidor. To tell the truth, Muuli had a soft spot in his heart for Semidor. To him Semidor was living evidence of the new life in Koordi that the modest district Party organizer was called upon to build.

During his two years as Party organizer in the district, shoots of the new life had sprung up everywhere, at every step. First and foremost, Muuli had seen them in the growth of the Party organization, in the fact that the best people of the district, such as Kaarel Maasalu, had swelled its ranks; but still and all, perhaps the clearest manifestation of the force of the new life in Koordi was the miraculous change in Semidor—in the past, Semidor the luckless.

At times Muuli's judgments were at divergence with the opinions of the others, who might feel, for instance, that he overestimated the potentialities of Semidor or Roosi Rist, and did not fully appreciate the services of Janson, a farmer just like them who had risen to a position of authority.

There was one very important circumstance which guided Party organizer Muuli in his judgments and decisions. He visualized the farmers of Koordi as they would be tomorrow, in the future. And in this future he assigned no small role to Semidor, the failure of yesteryear. And the modest, browbeaten Roosi Muuli visualized in the future as quite a different person, a Roosi whom no one in Koordi had yet seen—a woman of energy and efficiency, doing important work.

Right now Muuli was having a certain difficulty in finding Janson a place in that Koordi of tomorrow. He was even inclined to doubt whether the farmers of the district would retain Janson in his post at the next local Soviet elections. But he was prepared to aid and assist Janson, too, to the best of his ability. He realized very well that no one would supply him with trained, intelligent and energetic organizers, with advanced men and women, from the outside, that the new life in the district had to be built up by these plain Koordi folk, that they had to be reared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Saamu shuffled helplessly on the sun-warmed gravel of the road—he turned to the right, then to the left, and stopped in lingering uncertainty.... He took his hat off with a puzzled look, lifted his face to the sky and stood listening. The July heat fanned his brow. Pestering flies buzzed softly about his face and stung painfully. By Saamu's signs a thunderstorm was brewing. The birds, too, sounded excited, singing and twittering more restlessly than usual, and a frog somewhere under the water gave a muffled croak. It augured rain clouds and a storm.

Saamu had lost his way, though he was not so very far from home. Feeling with his foot, he found a rock, sat down on it, placed his coarse canvas bag beside him and began to recollect the way he had come.

From the Kurvest farm he had walked out on the highroad, then turned off towards Vao's farm, but the nearer he got to it the slower and more uncertain had his steps become. He had stopped short of the farm, pondered and then turned back. He had gone down the high-

road as far as the ruins of the old inn, from where a cart track led to Crane farm. But he did not reach Paul and Aino either—he turned back. And all the time he thought to himself—where to go?... To Vao? Liina sometimes treated him to holiday pie and jellied calf's foot, but what of it? That's just what made it a holiday treat—its being given a guest once a month, which was easier than giving an outsider daily bread and a roof over his head out of charity. Should he go to Paul and Aino? No, that was impossible—they had just about enough for themselves. Apply to the district authorities? But Saamu had never been inside a government office in his life—a place like that frightened him. State affairs were handled there, and Saamu's business was private, a little matter, you might say.

At the forest clearing Saamu had come across a group of children. They had surrounded him in a noisy little flock.

"Saamu, Saamu, where are you going?"

And Saamu had shaken himself and brightened up. He had laughingly caught and stroked the silky flaxen heads and recognized the children by their voices.

They had held out to him their baskets and jars filled with wild strawberries.

"This is from me, Saamu. . . ."

"Mine are better. . . ."

"Take mine, too, Saamu."

Saamu's chin and lips had become stained with the juice of strawberries, which he sampled with exclamations of astonishment and praise.

"Where are you going, Saamu?"—they were not to be put off without a clear and satisfactory reply.

Saamu never lied, neither to grownups nor to children, and he said simply:

"I don't know."

"Then what are you going for?" the children cried in chorus.

"I'm just going, that's all," Saamu said gravely, and picked up his bag.

They had wanted to go with him, but he got angry—something he rarely did—and turned away from them. They grew quiet and went back to the woods to pick more strawberries.

And Saamu had shambled along between the footpaths and the road until he eventually lost his way. He now sat on a rock, trying to collect his thoughts, looking back upon the way he had come here and thinking what next to do.

Before Saamu left the Kurvest farm there had been a talk with Juhan Känd. Juhan said he had had enough of it, giving Saamu eat and drink for a whole year—let others do it now.... As it was the farm hand Jaan cost him a good bit, and he couldn't afford to keep two. Saamu had better find other fools like he, Juhan, who would support a man for nothing, merely for feeding the pigs and milking the cows. He had better go to Jaagu farm, where they were collecting all the beggars into a kolkhoz.

Juhan was generous to the very last. He put a whole loaf left over from the previous week and a piece of boiled pork into Saamu's bag.

"This will see you to next year's crop...." Juhan had said.

He had a joke for every occasion, did this man.

"And you'd better start out early, while it's light. D'you hear?" Juhan had said, looking suspiciously at Saamu, who sat without stirring.

Saamu had nodded and said nothing. What could he say? Känd was the master of the farm. Before him Mart Kurvest had been the master. With Mart not even his wife Anna, sister Anna, had dared to argue. You couldn't argue with the masters.

Saamu now thought he remembered the road he was on: probably the one that led to

Snake Swamp—yes, that's the one it was. About two kilometres ahead it ran into Snake Swamp. There only an experienced hunter who knew all the paths could pass safely among the deceptively firm quagmires covered with bright green grass. A person who did not know his way about there, even though he were not blind, would flounder in the black rotting mire, be drawn under....

Saamu let his mind dwell on Snake Swamp. How many times had he told the children stories about it which he had heard from other people.

A dense chill mist rose over Snake Swamp even on the driest and warmest summer evenings. If a person breathed too much of it he would become dizzy and stupefied, he would lose his way and death would not terrify him. There were places there that the foot of man had rarely trod and where the snakes did not fear human beings. The swamp abounded in wild ducks and geese, and the cranes flew there to hunt snakes. Ten years back, the cowherd Ants had gone to the swamp to look for a stray cow, and neither he nor the cow were ever seen again.

Snake Swamp—vast, alien and cold—was hostile to men. Priidu Murumets, who dwelt

by the swamp, had tried in his young days to grapple with it. He had dug ditches, drained a patch of land and ploughed the black soft soil. But the swamp had taken everything back from Priidu, and people in Koordi merely shook their heads and said: "Thought he could get the better of Snake Swamp. . . ."

Saamu pictured himself coming to the swamp in the evening. Though the sun had set, a breath of warmth would still be wafted up from the fields—he would feel it on his back. Then a bitterish stagnant odour would strike him in the face, a wave of cold mist envelop him and the strange heady smells of decay set his brain reeling. . . . And then the cold water would start oozing up from under the warm soft moss on which he had stepped. To stand thus, filling his lungs with the intoxicating swamp fumes, and then utter oblivion. . . .

The sound of hurried footsteps reached Saamu's ears. A man was walking along and blithely singing a comic song:

> Saaremaa's a tiny land,
> Yet the songs ring throughout the land,
> And our laddies are better than yours,
> And the songs that we sing are best.

Saamu recognized the voice—it was Semidor—and before he was aware of it himself

he stamped his bare heels on the ground, slapped his knees, and caught up in a thin wasplike voice:

> And we sing our songs from day to day,
> Saaremaa's songs that are sweet and gay.

And they finished off together:

> And our laddies are better than yours,
> And the songs that we sing are best.

A human shadow fell upon Saamu.

"What are you doing here, Saamu?" Semidor asked. "And a bag with you too...." He deposited something heavy on the ground, probably a sack or a suitcase.

"Just sitting.... I'll soon be moving," Saamu said, overjoyed. "You have a bag too."

"It's a suitcase—packed full," Semidor said importantly. "I'm making a long trip, you know—to the Black Sea...."

Saamu wanted to say he was going on a long trip too, but he desisted, in order not to complicate the conversation. He felt surprised: "To the Black Sea?" That must be very far away, much farther than Snake Swamp. Judging by Semidor's happy voice his was a joyous trip.

"Is the water black down there?" Saamu discreetly enquired.

"No, it's blue, it's good water," Semidor explained. "The water's the same everywhere, only the sky is different. . . . I'm travelling with an excursion to look over an Estonian kolkhoz by the Black Sea. Going out now to catch the train, then another three days by train."

"Do they live rich?" Saamu asked.

"You bet," Semidor said in an indulgent tone. "Down there oranges grow the way potatoes do here. But how are you to know—you've never eaten them, I guess."

He was right. Saamu had never tasted an orange.

"What's that bread in your bag for?" Semidor said suddenly. "Going adrift on the high seas without a rudder? Has that joker kicked you out, Saamu, eh?"

Saamu sighed.

Semidor emitted an expressive whistle.

"Then what the devil are you sitting for?" Semidor flared up. "Sitting there like a sack of oil cakes. . . . Why, I'll drive that Känd into the narrowest well like a scraggly chicken! Well, what are you sitting here for?"

Saamu got to his feet with a puzzled look.

"I'll miss my train, messing around with you here," Semidor snorted. "You go down to our farm, tell 'em I sent you. Let 'em take the

matter up with the district executive committee. But you won't find the way, drat it. The best thing would be to see you off to Runge's place."

Semidor whipped his watch out of his pocket and snapped the lid. After a moment of fierce thinking he waved his hand with a reckless gesture and seized Saamu by the sleeve.

"Take your bag, come along. I'll make it in the evening by the freight train."

And he dragged Saamu along with him almost at a run.

"You spit on that dirty dog," Semidor comforted him as they went along. "I was worse off than that. Stepped over death five times, and here I am. You won't tackle me with bare hands now, no fear.... See, the county's sending me down to the Caucasus to have a look at the achievements."

Saamu shambled along snappily to keep up with Semidor. There was much in the latter's boastful speech he could not understand, but one thing at least was clear—that they were now leaving behind the road that led to Snake Swamp with its sinister mists and quagmires. A happy and at the same time guilty smile lingered on Saamu's face. He hoped he wouldn't be the cause of Semidor

missing his train to that wonderful country down by the Black Sea....

The family council held by Paul, Aino and Semidor decided that Saamu was to stay at Crane farm, at least until the question of his pension had been settled in the district executive committee. And then they'd see.

"I'll be back from the Caucasus by that time," Semidor assured them.

And so the little family on Crane farm increased.

Another new tenant was soon to make his appearance at the farm, where he was awaited with no little agitation and very great preparations. When Paul reached the rafters of the new house Aino was no longer able to help him. She spent most of her time indoors, peaked and very freckled, with a look of tense concentration on her face. She sat by the window, cutting out and sewing diapers and baby shirts. Facing her across the table sat Saamu with a pile of willow twigs on his lap.

They sat there engaged in low and earnest conversation amid a clicking of the scissors and the steady flash of twigs in Saamu's hands —he was weaving them round the light framework of juniper hoops.

Sometimes after supper, when Paul, tired from the day's work, sat nodding drowsily over an evening pipe, he could hear their voices as in a dream. What did they talk about? About the most diverse and ordinary things—about how the bee finds her way to the hive, no matter how far she flies out, about snakes and ants, about how best to bake bread so that it should keep fresh as long as possible, and about how much wheat and joy a man needed to live well and keep him from leaving Koordi for the arms of the Grim Reaper before his time.

And in this dozing languor it seemed to him that it was not Aino and the blind Saamu sitting by the window, but his father and mother, there in the little basement hole of the Koordi grange whose stone walls even in the summer oozed with the dense sweat of damp. They too had spoken mostly about their daily bread. But how strange, whence came that faint golden radiance like a halo about their heads—the afterglow of sunset through the window? The little window in the home of his childhood had been on a level with the ground and no sun ever penetrated there either in the morning or in the evening. And that happy laughter? His mother had never laughed....

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Returning home from town one Sunday evening shortly before reaping time, Kaarel Maasalu, instead of following the straight road, made a big detour and drove down to Crane farm.

Judging by the fact that Kaarel had not removed the pipe from his mouth all the way down from town and puffed at it continuously, and drove his horse on unsparingly, he was evidently in a hurry and his mind was preoccupied with something important. Kaarel would not be stirred out of his equilibrium by anything trivial. Even the cap on his head was tilted back at an unusual angle, considering Maasalu's neat and unflurried habits. His appearance in general was so strange that when Mother Tilde met him on the road she was all agog in an instant and sniffed the air to find out whether he had had a drop too much in town.

Apparently he hadn't. Maasalu even reined in the horse and had a chat with Tilde. But his words were so extraordinary that

they threw Mother Tilde into a still greater flutter.

With a glance at Tilde's tumbledown moss-grown roof Kaarel said:

"Your house is on its last legs, Tilde. Good idea to build a new one, what?"

Taking it as a joke, Mother Tilde struck her arms akimbo, and gave tit for tat:

"Not a bad idea. Pity no one thought of it before you...."

Kaarel nodded and rode on.

A single glance at his friend's face told Paul that he had not come on a casual visit. Maasalu was not the kind of man to drive his horse three or four kilometres out of his way for the sake of an idle chat.

"They've started organizing the first kolkhoz on Saaremaa," Kaarel began with unusual haste. "I got it from reliable people...."

Paul slapped his friend heartily on the back, gave a whistle of approval and leisurely produced the tobacco pouch from his pocket—this was going to be a long talk.

"Well, old chap," he said importantly, "seems to me this affects us also. It's about time too...."

"It is," Kaarel acquiesced with a nod. "Here's what I think—we ought to do the

ploughing and sowing this autumn together. The main thing is that if we begin a month earlier we win a year."

They looked at each other and grew thoughtful. Long accustomed as they were to understand each other at a glance, they were now thinking approximately of the same thing.

"Well, is the first furrow up to us?" Paul asked.

"Who else?" Kaarel said. "Of course us."

They went inside and settled themselves at the table for a long and earnest talk. Aino and Saamu caught scraps of conversation which they could not quite grasp.

"If we go about it the right way you won't recognize Koordi in five years' time," Maasalu was saying. "The countryside itself will look different—down with the stone walls, we'll plough up the balks and stretch the fields away up to the horizon, like in the Ukraine. A pig farm of two hundred head. Only graded seed for sowing. Fertilizer as much as the fields need...."

"We'll have to have our own truck, and a power plant..." Paul said.

"Light in every home, in the cattle shed and the hen roost," Kaarel agreed. "Radio.... Light nothing! We'll have new houses....

Mother Tilde's we'll scrap, throw it onto the rubbish heap! We'll turn the Jaagu place into a henhouse. I've had enough of it—I don't want to live in it any more!"

Maasalu thumped the table with his fist.

His voice boomed so loud that Aino looked round nervously. She never thought that man had any nerves. What was up? What was this castle in the air they were building?

Then they spent a long time working out all kinds of figures, looking through the newspapers and debating. Muuli's name cropped up more and more often in their conversation. At length they got up and Paul put on his jacket, saying that he and Kaarel were going out to attend to a certain matter. It wasn't far, he would soon be back.

The cart rode slowly through the fields; it covered much less ground than the conversation of the men sitting in it did.

"It wasn't today nor yesterday I made up my mind about it," Maasalu was saying weightily. "D'you think it was just an accident we three banded together at the farm? Life threw us together, yes. So it wasn't chance at all, it was to help each other. And say there were ten times as many of us and twenty times more land and cattle? And tractors to help

us out, and as much fertilizer to put into the land as it needed.... That's what I'm thinking about. Anyway, we'll hear what Muuli has to say about it."

"D'you know when I first thought about it?" Paul said gravely, turning his head so that his friend should not see his face. "That time when you were all helping me to put out the fire—that's when I realized it...."

They found Muuli in his little orchard among the young trees. He invited Paul and Kaarel to sit down on a bench and heard them out attentively. They both spoke with a certain measure of restraint—who knows how the Party organizer would take it—what if he suddenly, for some reason or other, considered it untimely? They told him they had heard a kolkhoz was being organized on Saaremaa. If on Saaremaa why not in Koordi? They themselves would not be averse to joining it. No doubt some others in Koordi would wish to come in—they could probably make up a group. They'd like to know the details, what arrangements had to be made. What did Muuli think of it?

Slowly, with the thoroughness of the peasant, Muuli wiped his soil-stained hands on

the grass, and, holding back his feelings, invited them into the house with a sweeping gesture. He led them into the room and drew chairs up for them by the table.

Gusts of wind blew into the room through the open windows, filling out the curtains and whisking open the pages of a book that lay on the table. The wind, the linen curtains billowing out like sails, and the maps and the old barometer on the wall gave Muuli's room the look of a cabin on board a ship sailing among the trees.

Their glance wandering about the room and coming finally to rest on Muuli, Paul and Kaarel noticed a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"Well, so it's starting, eh?" he asked, and took the answer out of their mouths as it were, saying in a tone of approval: "To be sure, it's starting."

Pacing up and down the room with a measured tread, he began speaking. It was a new thing here, a responsible matter. To get it started and rouse others you had to come to them with something definite and well-considered. They could figure it all out now—roughly, of course. He, Muuli, would make all the necessary enquiries tomorrow, and mean-

while they could get down to brass tacks. They were interested in how it would look in figures? —all right, then....

Muuli sat down at the table and the computations began anew. They first took the three sections of Jaagu farm, calculating their present income and their estimated income as a kolkhoz. The difference in the latter's favour was substantial. Then they added Crane farm, Roosi Rist's fields, the former fields of Koor and Tatrik's land to that of Maasalu, Taaksalu and Semidor and worked it out again. The difference was still more striking in favour of collective farming.

Maasalu's clenched jaws worked with excitement. Paul clutched the stub of a pencil in his sweaty palm.

"Bear in mind we've only been considering your present resources, the initial capital, so to speak," Muuli said, laying down his pencil and pacing the room again. "Don't forget the State will help with loans. You can buy a motor truck and a dynamo.... You may want to install electric lighting...."

Muuli spread a map of the district on the table, and the three men bent over it. Muuli's hand traced on the map a figure remotely resembling a horseshoe. Its base was formed

by the fields of those who Paul and Kaarel thought were likely to make up the nucleus of the new farm. The semicircle of the horseshoe arch was broken by the Kurvest farm—Känd's land. In the middle of the horseshoe lay a huge emerald-green patch—Snake Swamp.

"The nucleus hasn't got any good lands—that's a pity. No compact acreage," Muuli said ruefully, engrossed in the map. "There you are! It could be better."

Kaarel looked up at Paul and Muuli. "Who says there's no compact acreage? There it is—Snake Swamp. I've been having that in mind."

Paul stared at Kaarel in astonishment. Even Muuli, who never showed surprise at anything, looked up with interest and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"The biggest job here is to dig a drainage canal two kilometres long," Kaarel explained. "The rest is simpler. We'll drain about forty hectares of land the first year. In two or three years we'll have oats and wheat growing on the whole of the swamp—and what oats! Provided, of course, we get credits for fertilizer," he added as an afterthought.

"We'll get credits all right," Muuli said. He drew a thick line on the map joining the two

ends of the horseshoe to form a single whole. "See? Quite another picture."

He stood up and laid the pencil on the map. Paul and Kaarel rose too. Though the conversation had lasted quite a time many points still seemed to be hanging in the air.

"All the details can be settled in the process of the work. Go ahead and get the people together," Muuli said. "I congratulate you, comrades!"

They shook hands long and warmly, shifting from foot to foot and smiling shyly as men do under the stress of emotion.

Kaarel and Paul rode home in thoughtful silence. The faint shadows of dusk were falling across the ripening fields of Koordi. A corn crake cried in a dewy dell with a noise like the ripping of tough linen. A hare hopped across the road and dived into the rye standing motionless and drowsy in the becalmed air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Priidu Murumets on his distant farm by the swamp was waiting for Kaarel or Paul or someone else to come and explain what was afoot in Koordi—had they all gone mad there?

He had known no peace since yesterday. Had it not been the busy haymaking season he would have gone down to Paul at Crane farm to find out for himself, but the grass was already running to seed, the weather was hot and there was no time to lose.

Priidu rhythmically swung his scythe on the soft swampy hummocks that smelt of sun-warmed moss and red-bilberry leaves. What he wanted to do, though, was to drive his scythe into the ground and run off to the neighbours—so staggering was the news that had reached him.

He threw frequent glances at the path leading into the bushes to see whether his little girl was coming to tell him that Maasalu had arrived. Strict injunctions had been given at home to run immediately for father if anyone came.

The minute he came home he eagerly asked his wife Maali:

"Has there been anyone?"

"No, no one," Maali answered.

Priidu made his wife Maali repeat again and again the amazing story of her previous day's trip to the Koordi creamery.

Maali had barely hitched the horse to the post when the women of her acquaintance crowded round her and asked whether it was true that Priidu was organizing a kolkhoz. The thing Maali had heard next was simply bewildering. Folks in the district were saying that Priidu had come to Kaarel Maasalu with a proposal to join together in a kolkhoz and drain Snake Swamp.

Priidu shifted about in consternation on his bench. "Is that what they said? And me sitting here not knowing anything. Well, and what did Kaarel say to that?"

"Kaarel agreed to it and has already started calling the people together."

"But where is he?" Priidu asked in despair. "Why doesn't he come?"

Maali went on to relate that according to rumours many intended joining it. A slightly different version of the story was given at the cooperative store—Semidor had sent a tele-

gram from the coast of the Black Sea demanding that his friends Maasalu and Runge set up a kolkhoz. Here again people repeated the names of Runge, Maasalu and Taaksalu, and even Vao was mentioned.

"Semidor?" Priidu asked jealously. "I can see him tackling the swamp! He'll lose himself in it like a hen. No, it's Kaarel or Runge.... There must be something in it—it can't be just talk, eh?"

Priidu looked at his wife in considerable perturbation. She returned him a look of blank perplexity.

Priidu went about his usual business. He whetted the scythe for the next day's work and mended the frame for carting in the hay. Maali had already decided that Priidu had dismissed this strange affair from his mind, when he suddenly smiled and said:

"You know, it could be done.... I always said so...."

And there was an odd unaccustomed note of pride in Priidu's voice.

"What could be done?"

"Why, that swamp...."

He padded noiselessly towards the door across the hard-beaten earthen floor in his soft leather sandals and said:

"We'd try the taste of white bread then. Yes. And who knows. . . ."

Priidu opened the door and stood on the threshold, bathed from head to foot in the blinding rays of the hot midday sun. The deep furrows stood out sharply on his lean neck burnt a purple-brown by the sun. He was unprepossessing in appearance, was little Priidu, all gnarled, with knotted toil-worn fingers, in work sandals and a shirt stained dark with sweat on the back, but Maali loved him as he was. She had borne him four children. He was good to her and the children. It wasn't his fault they hadn't grown rich after twenty years of married life. Snake Swamp was to blame for that. It swallowed up all Priidu's labours, engulfed in one year the ditches it had taken him two years to dig; the swamp grasses smothered the stunted oats—for Priidu had neither the strength nor means to manure the strips he had wrested with such toil from Snake Swamp.

Now if an arterial canal were dug to drain off the stagnant black swamp waters, that huge marsh would dry up and the ground grow hard underfoot. Then you could put it to the plough. Why, there were scores and hundreds of hectares there that could be turned into

ploughland if only the forces could be found to do it—what could he, Priidu, do all by himself?... So the time had come—the people of Koordi now realized where their happiness lay buried!

Priidu squinted his colourless eyes, keen as a bird's, peering out to see whether anyone was coming down the slope to the hollow. It dawned on Maali that Priidu was waiting for Maasalu.

He waited for him the next day too. The hay was already mown, but still there was no sign of Maasalu or Runge. "If no one comes tomorrow, I'll go myself, as soon as I'm through with carting in this hay," Priidu decided. He sat on a bench in the kitchen, a prey to disturbing conjectures. "What if it's all old wives' tales, if there's nothing in it...." He was cutting out a rake. Three species of wood went into the making of a rake—fir, birch and apple tree. Young fir made an excellent material for the handle—it was thin and supple. Priidu dried it under the ceiling until it gave a twang when struck. The headpiece had to be carved out of a harder wood so that the teeth sat firmly in their sockets. Birch was the wood for that. As for the teeth, they had to be made out of the hardest and strongest wood—the

apple tree. Priidu was finishing the headpiece when there came a knock at the door and Maasalu walked in.

"You're a long time in coming," Priidu said reproachfully as he got up to meet him.

He looked with admiration at Maasalu, at his muscular neck and sinewy hands which seemed as though carved out of apple tree when it is in its prime and there is not a single rotted or weak fibre in it—a material you could use without hesitation for the strongest jobs.

"I suppose you guess what's brought me here, Priidu," Maasalu said simply, picking up the unfinished headpiece—not all the teeth had been set in yet—and admiring the workmanship.

"I've heard the rumour," Priidu said. "It's become a habit with me never to believe rumours. But I'd like to believe this one."

Koordi was agog from end to end. Never had there been so much talk in the district about the masters of Jaagu farm and Crane farm as in those days; the news that the new settlers had started to organize a collective farm spread like wildfire to the remotest farm-

steads. It was on everyone's lips in Koordi, wherever villagers met they spoke of nothing else.

Paul Runge and Johannes Vao met too. Paul said they could now continue the conversation they had started in the spring—the time had come: before the cranes rose over Snake Swamp taking wing for the south there would be a kolkhoz in Koordi.

"Aha..." Vao uttered with a significant nod. "I haven't thought it over yet—it's not like buying a pig, you know. But I'm not saying no.... You see what I mean? I've got a little score to settle first, then I'll think the matter out and let you know."

He sat before Paul, a broad massive figure barring the way out—he had squeezed his son-in-law in a corner between the table and the wall. Paul didn't envy the one Johannes was intending settling scores with; there wasn't a power in the world that could make this stubborn man swerve from a resolve he had once made.

New people joined in with each passing day. Quite a new voice stood out amid the general chorus—that of Mother Tilde, the one-cow woman from Järve farm, Tatrik's neighbour. This woman of forty-five who had brought a

whole brood of children into the world had contrived to preserve robust health and vigour. When the wave reached her she promptly declared that she was joining the kolkhoz and hastened to repeat it for all to hear. And Mother Tilde, let it be said, had a ready tongue.

"I've had about enough of this life!" she cried, striking a truculent attitude. "I know what it is to struggle along all by yourself, borrowing a plough from Tatrik and a horse from Meisterson, and going to Mihkel Koor for seed. And if Tatrik and Meisterson treated you neighbourly and didn't demand any payment, Koor made up for it, he made you work it out three times as much."

With Semidor's return the tension and excitement rose to a still higher pitch. He came home on the eve of the harvesting, looking younger and chock-full of stories and fresh impressions. People fell over themselves in inviting him to their homes, and everywhere he was obliged to recount without end how he had fed the silkworms in the Estonian kolkhoz in Abkhazia, how he had drunk red wine out of a keg and what the bullocks were like which they used for ploughing, and how much the kolkhoz members there got paid per workday

unit in wheat, honey and grapes. People plied him with questions about the big Russian and Ukrainian collective farms where harvesting combines garnered the wheat and electric motors did the threshing. Semidor with an air of self-importance frequently consulted his notebook: it contained a mass of facts that amazed the people of Koordi. He had written down almost the complete life story of the old kolkhoz member in whose house he had lived. The old man hailed from these parts, not far from Koordi. He had migrated to Abkhazia about fifty years before in search of land. The family had settled on bogland. "On bogland!" cried the Koordi folk in astonishment. "Why, there's plenty of that in Koordi, he needn't have gone all that way! And now it's all orchards and vineyards, you say?"

"Now, you just listen!" Semidor cried excitedly, and everyone hung on his lips. "For his workday units the old man got two tons of wheat and half a ton of honey, not counting a nice little sum in cash!"

Johannes Vao, who had come to hear Semidor, wheezed hard. Half a ton of honey! Why, he, Johannes, had never got so much honey in all his life. Johannes gently elbowed the women out of the way, drew his chair up

close to Semidor the better to hear him, and demanded details. The women breathed hotly down Johannes' neck.

Semidor demonstrated exotic fruits—oranges and pomegranates. The pomegranates especially made a great impression; they looked like huge crimson-coloured bulbs with juicy red berries inside.

"And these are grown on the kolkhoz?" people queried.

Semidor nodded his head respectfully.

But the bright oranges and pomegranates receded into the background when Semidor produced some potato tubers from the depths of his bag and passed them around for all to inspect. These were samples of new varieties of canker-resistant potatoes developed in the fraternal Republics, and they had been presented to Semidor for the farmers of Koordi. The gathering examined the tubers with almost reverential awe. In these parts potatoes carried more weight than pomegranates; the people here had been growing potatoes for ages and were expert at it. The Germans had introduced that ravaging potato disease, canker, into Koordi during the occupation period, and since then the fight against this scourge had assumed great importance; the year before, even Johan-

nes Vao had lost half his potato crop because of canker.

"*Tublid mehed*,"* Johannes Vao said.

"*Tublid*..." Priidu Murumets, the marsh dweller, echoed.

Glancing at Priidu, Semidor recalled the marvelous amelioration machine he had seen in operation on the fields of a kolkhoz, and he launched into an animated description of it. In a single day this complex and ingenious machine dug a ditch hundreds of men wouldn't be able to dig in several days.

"I'll eat my old hat," Semidor swore, "if that machine didn't cut through the swamp faster than the *Põhjala* ploughed through the sea. And behind it it left a deep ditch... "

"Now if we only had one," someone said with an envious sigh.

"Only big farms, collective farms, are in a position to have those machines," Semidor said condescendingly.

A thoughtful silence settled over the room.

What with all these important events and the harvesting that supervened, another event of no little significance was thrown into the shade and passed almost unnoticed. A week

* Fine lads.

before the harvesting a special meeting of the Koordi machine cooperative shareholders was held. The report of the auditing committee—made by Johannes Vao—was so unfavourable for Känd that it was decided almost unanimously to elect a new chairman. At this meeting it dawned on Paul what scores Vao had spoken about settling.

When, a week later, Paul called on Kurvest farm in his capacity of village Soviet representative to tender Juhan Känd a highly unpleasant paper, he knocked at the locked door without obtaining any response. The stillness at the farm struck him as very odd. He looked into the cattle shed, but it was empty; neither cows nor pigs there, everything had disappeared. A fresh cowhide lay on the floor of the shed. It was then that Paul noticed the wheel marks of a truck in the yard.

When the house was opened they found all the rooms deserted: there was not a sign of Känd or his wife with her tiny popeyed lap dog. Shreds of paper and rubbish were strewn about the floor.

Once more the accursed farm was deserted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Johannes Vao was writing an application. Although it fitted in the space of a square-lined page out of a copybook, he wrote it long and slowly, pausing over almost each word.

"Please enroll me, Johannes Vao, in the agricultural artel '*Uus Elu*' "* he wrote, then stopped to think, meanwhile picking a strand from the nib with his rough, stiff fingers.

"New Life"—so that was the name of the new, commonly-owned farm composed of dozens of old farmsteads which now lost their accustomed old names Jaagu, Vao, Soo.... It had been given that name, people said, on the proposal of Semidor.

"In joining the artel I contribute two horses," wrote Johannes, then paused again. Who else was giving two horses? Very few—only Tatrik and Meisterson. Most of them would be giving a horse each—Lauri, Murumets, Taaksalu and others. Paul Runge would bring in old Antu.

* New Life.

Johannes Vao grunted significantly and looked over his spectacles at the empty chair facing him. He would have liked Semidor to be sitting in that chair at the moment.

"New Life—yes, that's quite right," he would have said to Semidor. "I approve of that, but bear in mind that it was me, Johannes, who gave the best horses for it."

Johannes Vao added a cow to the list and then began enumerating the farm implements. He wrote the reaping machine down first. Who else had given a reaper, eh? Only Tatrik and Lauri. But Vao's was the better machine—theirs were old and had been repaired several times. Johannes added to the list the mower and the horse rake, and the harrows—the disk harrow and the spring-tooth harrow—two ploughs, the cart and the sledge.

Johannes Vao gazed ever more sternly at the empty chair.

"So there you are, my friend Semidor. You never had a decent plough in your life, let alone a reaper," he felt like saying condescendingly. He was simply bursting with an overpowering sense of his generosity towards the new life. He wanted not only Semidor, but Maasalu and Runge and all the others to see him in all his grandeur and appreciate it properly.

When he had finished writing, Johannes asked Liina to bring him some hot water and he took a shave. Then he put on his old-fashioned dark suit, bought a long time before at Janes' in Tartu, took a handmade walking stick carved out of knotty juniper —he used it only on rare occasions—and set out.

It was a short distance to the Kurvest farm, where the management of the New Life Kolkhoz had recently taken up its quarters.

He walked at a leisurely pace, sedate and solemn and dignified, for all the world a bearer of blessings to the people of Koordi. He experienced neither regret for the past nor qualms about the future. Indeed, what was there to regret? If the truth were to be told, there was nothing special to look back upon—just a perpetual round of humdrum cares and worries and fears. Fears that haunted a man at every step. On his own little farm a man could be ruined in all kinds of ways—by rain and drought, by frost and heat. He had to beware of banks and shares, of the Meat Export Company middlemen, and Kukk the village tradesman, of swine plague and market fluctuations. It was a life full of snags and snares,

and a man had to pick his steps, had to have his wits about him if he wished to keep his head above water.

True, later on, under the Soviet Government, there was no more need to fear the banks and shares, but the lone farm was still a lone farm, a bit of the past with all its uncertainty for the morrow.

There was a time for everything, and the time had now come for changing life in Koordi. Johannes Vao understood that and approved.

The first person Johannes saw upon entering the Kurvest farm was Saamu. His trousers tucked up high and his gaunt rear wriggling with the effort, Saamu was washing the house porch and the steps.

"You here, Saamu?" Johannes asked in surprise.

"Yes, I'm here," Saamu answered in a businesslike tone. "The management took me on—we need people here. So you've come too? Step into the office."

Johannes muttered something by way of reply and went inside. The hum of many voices in the room did not cease upon his entry. Semidor stood arguing excitedly. Johannes passed round the company and shook

hands solemnly with Priidu Murumets, Peeter Tatrik, Paul, Roosi and the others.

Then he went up to the table, which was covered with a red cloth, and exchanged a handshake with Kaarel Maasalu—the chairman of the collective farm.

"You've come—that's fine," Maasalu said approvingly. "Well, what have you brought—anything good?"

Johannes, amid a momentary lull in the conversation, leisurely produced his application from his breast pocket, smoothed it out and handed it to Maasalu with a significant little cough.

He handed over the application with an air of such solemnity and deliberation that one might have thought this was not a paper lying in the palm of his hand, but a team of horses, a reaper, a horse rake and a heap of other property. He stood with his legs apart and seemed to occupy more space than he usually did, his broad back shutting off both the table and Kaarel Maasalu behind it from the men sitting about the room.

Possibly Johannes expected that his mood would communicate itself to Kaarel and that the latter would receive the long list with special deference and read it aloud to the assem-

bled company. But nothing of the kind happened. Kaarel ran his eye cursorily over the first few lines, slipped the application into a file and nodded.

"All right. Sit down and lend an ear. We're having an informal conference, a sort of family affair...."

And straightway, as though nothing particular had happened, Semidor resumed the interrupted conversation and began speaking heatedly about some wire or other on a derelict line. That was a way out! Get permission to dismantle that line and they would have all they needed for running a wire from the mill.

Johannes looked about him with a puzzled expression, not quite understanding what was going on. He had pictured this solemn moment quite differently. They seemed to take hardly any notice of him, and went on talking about some wire or other, apparently more interested in that queer fellow Semidor than in the substantial contribution which Johannes had just made to the common cause, a contribution at any rate worth much more than this wire.

Johannes, whose shoulders seemed to have suddenly sagged still more, withdrew quietly into a corner without attracting further notice

and sat down by the stove next to Priidu Murumets.

The talk, from what he could make of it, concerned the urgent jobs that had to be tackled first.

Priidu Murumets, a copper flush on his cheeks, was visibly agitated and intent on driving home some point of his own to Runge and Tatrik the while he kept glancing in Semidor's direction. He was talking about drainage works.

Semidor, however, was holding forth so loudly and excitedly that he monopolized everyone's attention. After telling them how they could obtain the necessary wire, Semidor said he even knew where they could buy a dynamo at a reasonable price. After all, installing electric lighting wasn't such a complicated job considering that they had the money for a dynamo. All they needed was to cart up the timber and put up the poles—tackling the job all together—and as for the wiring, that could be done by two or three men. The dynamo he, Semidor, would install himself. Two weeks and there would be light in Koordi!

"Twenty men could dig a drainage canal in two weeks. . . ." a quiet persistent voice uttered nearby, and Johannes looked round.

Priidu gazed pleadingly at Runge, Tatrik and Vao.

"We could clear twenty hectares in a fortnight," Priidu pursued, clutching Runge's hand. "We could plough 'em this year.... The main thing we need is good land.... The light can wait."

There was such a pain and a yearning after that good land in Priidu's voice that Johannes coughed in embarrassment and gravely nodded his head.

Meanwhile Semidor was already demanding boards to make at least temporary repairs on the dam by the old mill. Not so many men were needed for the job—Priidu Murumets could help, and someone else say....

"I have my doubts," Maasalu said coolly, listening to the conversations going on at different ends of the room. "Priidu's thinking how he can get you on the swamp job."

They all laughed.

"Oh, I'll do it with the women—with Roosi and Mother Tilde," Semidor said.

"Roosi is going to take over the cattle yard," Kaarel countered.

"Oh, then I'll do it myself!" Semidor said in a huff. "The main thing in the kolkhoz is electric lighting—otherwise what kind of a

kolkhoz is it? You haven't seen the kolkhozes in the Caucasus, none of you, so you don't know. . . ."

"At the very least we'd crop forty-five tons of oats from thirty hectares of ploughed swamp-land," the quiet voice next to Johannes spoke again. "Ninety cartloads of oats. Ninety cart-loads. . . ."

"We must have light at the cattle yard," Roosi said.

"Of course we must!" Semidor flung in triumphantly.

Johannes' eyes travelled searchingly from face to face. Peeter Tatrik and Ants Lauri were listening to Semidor with approval. Roosi sat by the window gazing out thoughtfully at the cattle sheds, her mind obviously engrossed more with thoughts of the morrow, when she would have to take over the kolkhoz cows in the public cattle sheds of Kurvest farm, than with the swamp and the copper wire. Runge sat thoughtfully biting the end of a pencil and his face gave no hint of what was on his mind.

"Twenty men won't be able to drain thirty hectares in a fortnight," Tatrik hazarded.

"Who says they won't?" Priidu flared up.

Vao took a sudden liking to dogged little Priidu whose heart was so set on fields that as

yet existed neither under the skies of Koordi nor on its map. The more he listened to Priidu and studied him the stronger did his sympathy go out to this man with his craving for fertile land, his unquenchable striving to conquer the treacherous swamp. True, at first blush, this was much too big a thing he was attempting to tackle, but still, it was very alluring.... Two hundred hectares there!

Johannes couldn't understand why they didn't all support Priidu's proposal—some even didn't seem to be able to make up their minds about what was to be considered the most urgent job.

He cleared his throat and held his hand out towards Maasalu, towards the new portraits on the wall and the poster still smelling of fresh paste. He commanded attention. Maasalu came to his aid by rapping on the table with his pencil.

"I can't understand what all the argument is about," Johannes said. "You'd think we didn't need fields and pastures, weren't interested in a source of income! When old Taavet came here—you all know him—Snake Swamp occupied the whole of Koordi. Taavet said this: 'As soon as I cleared a space for one foot I started looking around for a place to put the

other foot.... If I came across a stone I dug it out, if it was a tree I tore it up by the roots....' That's what Taavet said. So there you are—" Johannes brought his juniper stick down on the floor. "I'm with you, Priidu. Call me a windbag if twenty hefty men won't dig that measly little ditch and clear a good bit of that swamp in two weeks! I like the idea. I'm with you, Priidu...."

In the hush that followed, Ants Lauri was heard to say:

"I like the idea too."

Priidu beamed and nodded his head violently, and moved up to Vao, his new-found ally, chair and all.

"If we cultivate the swamp we'll have fodder for the cattle," Roosi struck in.

All eyes in the room were now turned on Johannes. He felt, to his no little astonishment, that the attention and admiration he had counted on when bringing his property here, had come; but it was not his horses and reaper and mower that had won the respect of these men —it was his first utterance.

Even Semidor suddenly fell silent and stared at Vao as though he were seeing him in that room for the first time.

"All right then," he said almost pleadingly.

"But you'll lend me a hand with the dam, won't you?"

"When we've dug the canal, why not," Priidu jealously threw in, anticipating Vao's reply.

"Well, team leader, what do you think?" Maasalu said, addressing Runge.

"It's all got to be done," Paul answered simply. "We'll drain the swamp and install lighting too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Kristjan and his mother Meeta arranged to give the cow Tiiu to the collective farm and leave themselves the two-year-old heifer. So Meeta had decided. All the families joining the kolkhoz were giving a cow each, and they were not going to be an exception.

"We're no worse than other people, are we Kristjan?"

"Why, yes, sure...." Kristjan answered.

In the morning, when old Meeta put on her Sunday shoes to take Tiiu down to the cattle yard, it suddenly transpired that Kristjan wished to accompany her. He had a matter to attend to there.

"What are you putting on your new shirt for, Kristjan?" Meeta asked suspiciously.

"You've put on your best kerchief, haven't you?" Kristjan said, and Meeta could say nothing to this retort.

Kristjan, pushing his firm ruddy cheeks out with his tongue and humming a tune to himself, shaved, wetted and brushed his hair and polished his top boots. The result was as

fine a lad as you could ever wish to see—strapping and blooming—there wasn't a door he could pass through without bending his head.

They sallied forth on a cool and windy September morning—Kristjan in front holding the rope thrown over Tiiu's horns, and Meeta, a wizened little old woman, trotting along behind with a twig in her hand.

The blustering September wind jostled Meeta along, whipped the kerchief on her head and blew her skirts about her old legs.

"Mind you, no one would say a word if we took the heifer down," Meeta began, bored by the silence of their progress, "and left ourselves the cow—seeing she's the only one we have.... But we don't want people to say all we put in was a heifer."

"Yes, yes, sure...." Kristjan assented absently.

He blew out his cheeks and began booming a march tune in imitation of a trumpet.

"Trum-tum, tooroo-rum...."

"They could say—Kristjan's not the last man in the kolkhoz, yet he grudged a cow."

"Yes, sure...."

The lowing of cows by the cattle sheds of the former Kurvest farmstead could be heard

from afar. Among the women in the yard Kristjan saw the tall figure of Roosi in a smock of dazzling whiteness and a kerchief wound cunningly turban-fashion above a crimson sunburnt face.

"Did you give her a clean down?" Kristjan suddenly remembered. "See those women working away with brushes over there? I guess they look the animals over first."

"She'll be good enough," Meeta said with an offended tightening of the lips. "They'll like her."

They entered the yard and came upon an animated babble of women's voices. Meeta jerked the knot of her kerchief under her chin with an habitual gesture and plunged full tilt and shrill-voiced into the feminine hubbub.

Kristjan, a trifle disconcerted by the snow-white smock and the crimson face, awkwardly steered a passage through the cow flanks, dragging a reluctant Tiiu after him. Not raising his gaze above the collar of the smock and the firm tanned neck, he muttered:

"Well, here's our milcher, will she do?"

Roosi critically examined the animal and stole a swift sidelong glance at Kristjan that took him in from head to foot.

"We were thinking whether to bring the cow or the heifer ..." Meeta began.

Had Meeta not been there, Roosi would have mockingly placed her hands on her hips, given Kristjan another survey and said:

"Why, it dazzles the eye to look at you, Kristjan, the way you've gotten yourself out, but you didn't think of cleaning up the cow—look at the dried muck on her sides...."

And he would have taken the currycomb from her hand and got busy with it on the cow's flanks, like some of the women had done before him when placing their skewbalds in Roosi's custody.

But Meeta was there, Kristjan's mother, and such severity was out of the question. So Roosi said kindly:

"Yes, she's a good cow.... I'll just smooth her down a bit."

A currycomb and brush appeared in Roosi's hands, and as she cleaned and scrubbed she praised the cow's points.

Little Meeta's heart swelled with pride. She kept tying and untying the knot of her kerchief and jerking its ends in place, and on her wrinkled face there shone a smile of delight.

This was a busy day for Roosi. The housewives had been coming since early morning.

And goodness gracious, how many requests, admonitions and instructions had they not poured into her ears! Red Helda was prone to suffer from cracked teats—Roosi was not to forget to grease them more often; dappled Selge of Tatrik's had recently been ailing—she needed picking up; and Salme Meisterson always gave her Tasane a piece of bread with salt before milking, otherwise she wouldn't let herself be milked. Would Roosi remember it?

The women did not go away after they had turned in their cows. They stood about in a crowd, and some followed Roosi into the cattle shed to see how she disposed the animals in their stalls, investigated the litter, and peeped into the water barrel to see whether the water was fresh.

Roosi gave an ear to all the counsel, but the chorus of requests and instructions did not seem to distract her from meeting the special duties she herself had set. When all was said and done, she was the chief here!

When a cow did not come up to her standard of fitness and cleanliness Roosi was inexorable.

"Mammi Lauri, I can't take the animal from you in that state. Here's a brush, there's

water in the barrel. They're going into a cow house, not to the field where the rain'll give 'em a wash down. You'll be holding me responsible tomorrow, and I'll hold you responsible today...."

Roosi at last pronounced Tiiu fit for admission.

"Come on, master, lead her in," she said to Kristjan in a mocking voice.

The warm, spacious cow house was full of disquiet and mooings. No wonder—new surroundings, new neighbours, and all this fuss and bother....

Tiiu was led into a clean stall. Roosi discovered, as she began to fasten the cow, that the chain was just a little too short.

"You'll find some chains lying on the sledge in the cart shed—pick one out," Roosi said to Kristjan.

He went out and was rather a long time over it.

"I daresay he won't find it," Roosi said.

So she went too, telling Meeta:

"Mammi Meeta, just hold her a minute, will you please?"

Meeta took the rope and stood waiting. She patted Tiiu, gave her a crust of bread, and started a loud conversation with Salme Meis-

terson across the cow house about the place being not so bad and Roosi being not so bad either—quite a capable person, as could be seen.

This topic exhausted, Meeta went on to confide to Meisterson's wife her indecision about giving the heifer or the cow Tiiu, but still there was no chain.

The old woman got tired of waiting. She tied the rope to the partition and betook herself to the cart shed.

What she saw there in the gloom of the shed by a pile of hay, after straining her weak-sighted eyes, left her speechless. Standing next to an old sledge and a basket apparently used for hatching chicks in, Kristjan held Roosi in his arms and was kissing her. The chain lay on the floor at their feet.

Meeta stared at them dumbfounded. Suddenly a shaggy puppy darted out from under the sledge and began yapping at the old woman.

Looking round and seeing Meeta standing there with compressed lips, Roosi wrenched herself loose with a little shriek, snatched up the basket and tipped it over on the head of blissful Kristjan. Puffs of hen's down fluttered in the air.

"I knew it, Kristjan, it's no use sending you for anything," Meeta said severely, looking reproachfully at her son whose head was crowned with feathers and straw and whose red face was bursting with a happy smile.

Meeta took the chain herself and went to help Roosi.

They went home together too, Meeta and Kristjan did.

Kristjan walked in front—a huge strapping figure with swinging arms—his feet leaving deep prints on the soggy autumn path. The very earth seemed hard put to it in carrying him. Behind, barely able to keep up with him, trotted little Meeta; three of her footsteps fitted into his single pace.

"Trum-tum-tara-rum . . ." hummed Kristjan.

"Kristi, I think Tiiu will be all right there," said Meeta.

"Yes, sure . . ." her son readily agreed.

They walked along past copses ablaze with the golden splendour of autumn. Overhead, from the direction of Snake Swamp, came trumpetlike calls. Meeta and Kristjan looked up. A flock of cranes was heading for the south in single file. Runge's words had come

true—"before the cranes fly away there will be a kolkhoz in Koordi. . . ."

The autumn leaves rustled underfoot. The maple leaves lay like red goose feet on the gold aspen carpet, and the evergreen firs of Koordi rose up in a mighty wall.

As she admired the rich carnival of colours, Meeta thought about the gay designs which the girls of Koordi have for ages past been embroidering on their wedding sashes. These bright wedding colours evoked memories of her poverty-stricken youth, of the humiliation and ill-treatment she had suffered in the homes of strangers, and of the perpetual struggle she and Jaan, Kristjan's father, had waged to make a livelihood. The poignant memory came and went in a flash, melted away like the sad cry of the cranes in the sky.

"Kristi," the mother said in a voice that shook.

"Eh?"

"My mind's easy now. Now we've struck deep root in the land, haven't we?"

"Why, yes," Kristjan muttered, looking back at his mother in surprise. "What's the point?"

"The point is that it's your father Jaan who wanted to be able to say that," Meeta replied

soberly. 'I'm like a pine tree growing in the bog,' he used to say, 'anyone can come up and pull me out roots and all—the earth doesn't hold me. . . .' And he was as tall as a ship's mast too."

The path plunged into a grove. A gate of thin poles barred the way. Countless clusters of ashberries hung down over the woodland fence and the rose hips glowed red and succulent. One need merely pass through the gate of this fence, bordered with luxuriant red clusters of ashberries and hazel bushes, to find, so it seemed, not only ripe nuts but all kinds of wonderful apples and cherries and plums growing in the depths. . . .

"Kristi," Meeta said again.

"What?"

"Roosi's a good girl, I think. . . ."

"Yes, yes, sure!" Kristjan agreed with spirit, and gripping Meeta about the waist he lifted her gently aloft and deposited her on the other side of the gate, breaking into a laugh so boisterous that its echo rumbled through the grove and a bird in the thickets took startled wing.

They walked up to the house. Meeta, barely able to keep pace with her son, looked lovingly at his broad back and powerful neck, thinking

how like his father he was. Though the soil of Koordi was poor it gave birth sometimes to giants, to men of prodigious strength in whose hands the heaviest plough seemed lighter than a feather. And had you asked Meeta how he had grown up such a Hercules, she would have answered simply: "Take the plough in your hands from the age of ten, mow a meadow the size of the whole district of Koordi and drink plenty of clabber—and you too will be like him!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Paul marched along the road with big strides behind the tool cart loaded with spades, picks and axes.

Behind him he could hear the loud breathing of many men, their heavy tread and noisy talk. Now and then his nostrils were assailed by the acrid suffocating smoke of home-grown tobacco; there was only one man in Koordi who could smoke such strong tobacco—Johannes Vao. And Vao was trudging along somewhere in the front ranks, in his canvas rain cape and high rubber boots. Now and again Paul could hear Taaksalu's deep-chested laugh and Priidu Murumets' thin tenor.

The men of Koordi followed along behind Paul in a compact group—the very same men who had saved his farmhouse from the flames, with many new ones besides. Only Semidor and the village smith Peeter were not here with them—they were mending the dam in preparation for starting the old mill.

One minute the capricious autumn sky sent down a brief passing drizzle, the next it poured

jets of slanting sunlight through the blue rifts and they glided over the nearby fields and groves.

Now the men came to the dismal bog hummocks covered with a sparse growth of grey herbs and emerald-green moss, with here and there between them stunted birch trees and pines—queer, crooked little pines fit neither for fuel nor lumber. The withered lower branches of these trees, already decrepit in their youth, were thickly covered with lichen.

The cart wheels sank into the soft, swampy tracks; the road steadily grew worse.

Emerging onto a small meadow in the middle of which lay a huge boulder, the road came abruptly to an end; it pulled up as though baffled and then ran off several branching footpaths into the heart of the swamp.

Ants Lauri stopped the horse and unharnessed it. The men armed themselves with spades and picks from the cart.

About seventy feet from the boulder freshly-dug earth could be seen: a deep, broad ditch about half a kilometre long started here. It put Paul in mind of a trench—a blind trench, so far, without inlet or outlet, a mere scar on the body of the swamp. It would be quickly

sucked under unless it were joined to the main canal.

The men walked down to the end of the ditch and stopped there in a silent group. Although there was quite a number of them—Paul counted eighteen—they seemed far fewer, a lost little handful amid the vast monotony of this dreary grey expanse where the very ground, soft and sagging, afforded men a poor footing.

Peeter Tatrik measured the length of finished ditch with his eye and peered ahead down the straight line of pegs. Only a bit of canal had been dug; the line of pegs ran far out, seemingly without end, and merged with the grey hummocks and brushwood.

Tatrik stroked his stubbly chin. And many were the eyes that involuntarily followed Tatrik's down the line of pegs. A pretty long way....

"We're digging too slow," Paul said. "Half a kilometre in five days. Must get more done today."

Tatrik shrugged.

"The devil only knows we're plugging away at it hard enough—our backs steam..."

"No, Peeter, it seems to me we haven't been going about it the right way. Now you took a

length of ditch to yourself, twenty feet of it, say, and dug it from first to last, and every man did the same. Here we are, a score of hefty fellows, and each pecking away at it for himself. It's a new thing and we ought to handle it in a new way."

"Well, how do you figure it then?" Priidu asked in a hurt tone, putting his foot on the jut of the spade. "You're the team leader. . . ."

Paul's eyes travelled slowly over the faces of the men standing around him and he was silent for a second. He read in their eyes at once an attentive interest and a sceptical chill —they didn't seem to expect anything in the way of a revelation from him.

Paul was having no easy time of it now. It was hardly for him to teach these men, who had behind them the experience of generations, how to wield a spade. They knew that without him. And he could not reproach them with insufficient zeal. Paul read these thoughts in the face of Johannes Vao, who stood phlegmatically contemplating the sharp edge of his spade.

"Well, let's hear what you've got to say," Johannes' face seemed to say.

Paul drew his head between his shoulders and braced himself as though he were about to lift a very heavy weight.

"I think we'll tackle the job differently," he said. "Taaksalu and I will go first and break the way—we'll clear the top layer, hack away the roots and remove the rocks. Priidu Murumets, Johannes Vao and two more of the stronger men will follow behind and take care of the second layer. All the others will deepen the canal to the bottom. Up to now you all used to go and sharpen your own tools. Today one man will do all that—Ants Lauri, let's say.... If we tackle it in a new way there'll be not eighteen of us but twice eighteen...."

"And let the tools be changed without interrupting the work, so the men shouldn't stand idle," Priidu flung in.

"That's right," said Paul. "And let's have a division of labour—some will use spades and the others pickaxes and crowbars."

All began speaking at once. The grindstone should be placed nearer. Two axemen should be detailed to hack away the roots—it would save time.

Paul drew a breath of relief and looked at Johannes Vao. Though the latter had not said a word, the businesslike manner in which he threw off his rain cape indicated that there were no objections to be expected from that quarter.

The spades bit into the soggy earth; the pickaxe came into play in Taaksalu's hands as he slashed away, grunting, at the supple wickerwork of swamp roots. Paul Runge and Kristjan Taaksalu moved steadily forward, ripping off the black peaty crust and pulling out rocks as they went along. The spades of Vao, Murumets, Meisterson and Tatrik entered bluish clayey soil. They dug themselves into the earth knee-deep. And all the others following behind them deepened their work—all one could see above the ditch was bent backs and the flash of spades throwing out earth. An embankment of earth grew steadily along the edge of the ditch and concealed the backs from view. Only the men in the lead could be seen—Runge and Taaksalu—moving along at full stature with perceptible progress. In the rear of the column the brown peaty-smelling water oozed slowly through the saturated spongy soil into the bottom of the ditch and followed obediently and compliantly in the tracks of the advancing men....

During the height of the work Kaarel Maasalu appeared upon the scene. He made straight for the head of the column. Paul glanced questioningly at the face of the kolkhoz chairman, which seemed to wear an expression of joy-

ous impatience, a barely suppressed smile of elation.

Maasalu glanced at his watch, looked down the line of pegs cutting across the swamp and said:

"It's going fast today. D'you think we'll get as far as the three pines today?"

Paul scanned the distance with narrowed eyes. He gave a wry smile.

Kaarel was pulling his leg. The three pines, clearly visible above the undergrowth, were at least a kilometre ahead.... That was nearly the end of the canal.

"In a week, if we try hard," he answered laconically.

"Are you sure?" Kaarel asked, and his white-teethed mouth stretched in a broad irrepressible grin of triumph.

Paul stared blankly at his friend.

The latter threw off his jacket and said impatiently:

"Here, let's have a go!..."

He returned the spade after a quarter of an hour's work, glanced at his watch again, and said in a casual way:

"Muuli phoned."

"No?" Paul said with interest. "Does he want to come down?"

Kaarel nodded. "He does. And not alone. He's coming down with a volunteer group from town to help us.... Johannes Uustalu told him about it this morning. A couple of hundred, I think...."

"Are you fooling?" Paul said, staring at him thunderstruck. "I shouldn't be surprised, though. You can expect it of old Johannes...."

He went off into a peal of joyous laughter.

"A-hoy!" yelled Kristjan Taaksalu in a deafening voice. "Old Uustalu's coming down! Help's on the way—go it, boys, peg away.... A-hoy!"

The collective farmers looked up with curiosity. What was that Taaksalu chattering about? What news had Maasalu brought? Where could they expect help from, who was coming down?

Kaarel cupped his hands around his mouth, but before he could speak there came from afar the protracted hooting of a car.

"They're coming!" someone shouted.

The men threw down their spades and pickaxes and scrambled up on the embankment to get a better view.

Down the road by which they had come that morning they caught a glimpse through the pine trees of a truck, no, two trucks,

three.... Trucks full of people. Red Flags fluttered above them, a vivid conquering challenge to the grey and rusty hues of the vast Snake Swamp. The wind brought down the words of a song.

The Party organizer Muuli glanced around for a convenient spot from which he could command a view of the crowd, and finding no eminence on the swampy ground he promptly climbed up on the frame of the grindstone.

The collective farmers of Koordi grinned their approval of Muuli's ingenuity.

Muuli now saw before him a host of unfamiliar faces, young and old, men and women. They drew close about the group of men from Koordi he knew so well. His eyes sought out in the crowd Murumets and Vao, Lauri, Tatrik and Taaksalu, whose shoulders towered above the hats of the men—they looked somewhat abashed and disconcerted just now—and he threw them a friendly smile.

"Look how many people there are today in Snake Swamp," Muuli began in a loud voice, in a tone of approval. "There never were so many people here before. The Soviet power has brought leather dressers, railwaymen, bakers and workers of all other trades from our

neighbouring town to help the collective farmers build up a new life in Koordi—help you drain Snake Swamp, turn it into fertile fields and raise crops on the bogland....

"I see they've brought flags with them and big portraits of Lenin and Stalin," Muuli said musingly. "No flags have ever flown over Snake Swamp. Soviet men have carried those flags into the primeval taiga and the desert, to the north and the south.... And they plant Red Flags wherever, at the call of great Stalin, they come to establish the new life, to open power stations and mines, factories and mills and new fields. So today, in starting our collective work on Snake Swamp, we unfurl our flags over it. Let us get to work, comrades!"

He jumped to the ground amid a storm of applause. The crowd surged forward with unfurled banners and clanking spades and pickaxes. They strung out in a long line down the row of pegs.

Johannes Uustalu, after a consultation with Paul, led away the advance team of railwaymen—experienced workers. Uustalu, as usual when at work, was in his invariable faded overalls. He moved among the crowd as though in his own family—everyone knew him and his presence here surprised no one. For such

was Johannes Uustalu's calling—to build and ever build the new!

Johannes Vao brought Paul out of a brown study by a tug at his sleeve.

"Let's not waste time," he said with a wink. "The guests always take their cue from the hosts, you know...."

And once more the pickaxes attacked the earth and the clods went flying off the spades.

The echoes of Snake Swamp were awakened by the shouts of many people, the thud of axes and pickaxes and the incessant screech of the grindstone. Somewhere ahead the men clearing the bog lit a bonfire. It refused to burn at first—the clinging swamp weeds hissed and spluttered, the saturated earth choked the flames, and the roots and branches piled up on it were damp, but men's efforts and aptitude won the day, and the fire caught. Then they started throwing uprooted stumps into it, armfuls of brushwood and whole pine trunks. The flames roared, fanned high by the wind, and the smoke rose in a pillar to the very sky. In this busy blazing of the flames, reducing to ashes the swampy undergrowth standing in the way of tillage, there was something akin to the tireless activities of the men and women battling with the bogland.

The flames were descried from afar by Semidor and Peeter the smith who were repairing the old mill dam.

"It's burning," Semidor said gleefully, his red-baked apple-looking face crumpling in a happy smile. "They're burning out Snake Swamp."

"Yes," concurred Peeter, laying down his hammer and tongs for a minute to admire the pillar of smoke that rose up on the horizon. "That's the end of Snake Swamp."

At midday the men of Koordi suspended work for a brief space. They sat down on the edge of the ditch and untied their bags to refresh themselves with the lunch they had brought from home.

Muuli, who happened to be passing by, heard gay laughter among a group of which Johannes Vao was the centre. Johannes sat picking a mutton bone and recounting something.

"What's the funny story?" Muuli asked.

"Oh, nothing much—I was just telling 'em about my suit," Vao said good-humouredly, pointing to the sleeve of that well-worn article. "You see it's like this—I bought it at Janes' in Tartu fifteen years ago, and it seemed pretty good and strong to me all the time. This morn-

ing I thought to myself, now what should I put on to go to work in, some old clothes? And Liina says: 'Put on your old suit, we'll soon have to throw it out anyway....' 'Old suit?' I thought. I had a good look at it, and true enough it was worn out at the elbows, the collar had a shine and the cuffs were frayed. Yes, it wasn't a good suit any more. Didn't notice it until someone else pushed it under my nose. I mention this because an old skin always seems new to you for a time and you cling to it when it's not worth keeping and it's better to get a new one. That's what I was telling 'em...."

Saying which Johannes Vao looked at Muuli from under his shaggy brows with an artless twinkle.

Muuli shook his head, was on the point of saying something but did not, then slowly moved away, smiling.

The work went on all day, till dusk. After four o'clock the news ran down the line that Johannes Uustalu and his railwaymen had reached the three pines. The water in the ditch was rising; it splashed underfoot, first ankle-deep, then steadily worked its way higher. Many had taken their boots off. Muuli held a hasty conference with the team leaders at

which it was decided to reach that day absolutely the main drainage system half a kilometre from the three pines in order to give the water an outlet. If they didn't manage to dig the canal at full width they were to run off at least a narrow ditch from the three pines and widen it afterwards.

When the men of Koordi finished their section they went on ahead to help Uustalu. They worked that day with a sort of rollicking ferocity, muddy and drenched from head to foot, unconscious either of the chill autumn wind or the cold water. The spade smashed in Taaksalu's hands. He looked ruefully at the broken handle, threw it away and picked up a crowbar. But soon the crowbar bent noticeably. Vao was awful to look at when, with a terrific effort, crimson in the face, he battled singlehanded with a huge boulder, shook it loose and tore it out of the ground. Murumets drove in his spade with a ferocious expression and threw the blue clay out of the ditch in great chunks. Paul glanced nervously from time to time at the sky—would they have time, would they manage it?

Thus several more hours of tense work passed by, seemingly all too quickly.

At last a cheer rose up in front and ran

down the line, reaching the collective farmers of Koordi.

Paul looked closely at the water underfoot.

"It's moving!" he cried.

And all around him there rose a clamour of excited cries and happy laughter.

"The water's moving, it's found an outlet!"

At dusk the town guests, seen off with hearty handshakes, got into the trucks and rode away. The collective farmers also made ready to go home. They were tired, but happy and excited. It had been a wonderful day.

The bonfires were left burning in Snake Swamp. They bathed the hummocky lowland in a merry living light and were mirrored in the dark bog water trickling through the swampy pores into the canal dug that day. A sharp ear might have caught a faint gurgling sound. The water was moving.

The fires in Snake Swamp burned long into the night. They were visible from afar, and the farmers in the neighbouring villages said, looking at the flames:

"Those are the bonfires burning in Koordi. The collective farmers are clearing the swamp for ploughland...."

Paul's home-coming, too, was awaited. Aino stood in the doorway pressing to her bosom a small bundle wrapped in a blanket—the new tenant of Crane farm, little Ants.

"Look, the fire's burning, the light," the mother said, gently uncovering her son's face. "Daddy has lit a bonfire, Ants...,"

Twenty-day-old Ants screwed up his face, but when the scarlet light that danced on the edge of the sky was reflected in his pupils, he opened his bright bulging eyes in astonishment and blew a bubble from his mouth, and Aino understood that he was smiling.

THE END